THE EYES OF ALICIA

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To Jessie

With Best Wishes

THE EYES OF ALICIA

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THE EYES OF ALICIA

BY

CHARLES E. PEARCE

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To

My Daughter

MABEL.

THE EYES OF ALICIA

CHAPTER I

IN THE TUMULT OF THE STORM

"ALICIA!"

The voice was shrill and grating, its tone insistent, imperious. The owner of the voice was an elderly man, his face unprepossessing enough under ordinary circumstances, and especially so now, it only by contrast with the fresh beauty of the handsome girl, who was his companion in the motor brougham making its way through the traffic on Waterloo Bridge towards the South-Western Railway Terminus.

"Yes, Mr. Haggar."

"I want you to reconsider your decision. You *must*. Just think what it means."

"I *have* thought," answered the girl, with a gesture of impatience. "What's the use of going over the tiresome business again? I've made it plain to you, I hope, that under no circumstances can I be your wife."

"What's your objection?"

Alicia Montrose kept her eyes fixed steadily in front of her. The finely-drawn lips were pressed firmly together, as if in resolve not to discuss the unpleasant subject.

"Have you anything to urge against me? Have I failed in the slightest degree to carry out the trust imposed upon me by your father? I've never sought to influence you in any way. I've left you

perfectly free. I waited until you came of age, and I was careful to find out that your affections were not placed elsewhere before I spoke to you of my earnest wish."

The girl turned upon him sharply, the corners of the beautiful mouth quivered for an instant.

"You were careful to find out! And what have you found out?" she exclaimed indignantly. "Have you been spying upon me?"

"No—no—no! As if I should [illegible] anything so base! I only judged by your own ways, your talk, your looks. If the constant delight of gazing upon you, of hearing your voice—if the one hope that has possessed me ever since I came from Jamaica means spying upon you, you're right. I plead guilty to nothing else."

There was intensity, passion, in the hard, rasping voice, but the girl was not impressed. It was as much as she could do to preserve her calmness under the strain of nervous irritation.

Some student of human nature once said that women take the compliments of young men to mean love, and the love-making of old men as mere compliments. Alicia shrugged her shoulders. The earnestness of David Haggar possibly struck her as ludicrous. If so, she was not without justification. The union of one so fresh and fair with David Haggar, the drawback of his sixty years accentuated by his shrivelled body, his dried waxen-like complexion, his colourless lips and his pale sunken eyes, most people would call unnatural, if not unholy. As ideas go now-a-days sixty is not considered old, but Haggar's long residence in a hot climate had aged him by at least ten years.

"You've said all that before, Mr. Haggar, and I refused to listen. I thought you'd given up your mad idea. If I'd any notion you were going to re-open the tiresome business I'd never have promised to see you off at Southampton. You must own I only did so at your urgent entreaty, and on condition that we should travel as ordinary acquaintances."

"Not ordinary acquaintances, Alicia—don't say that. We are friends, surely. I was your father's friend, and before he died—ten years ago—I promised him I would always look after you. I've done so to the best of my ability. I took the greatest trouble in selecting the best possible school for you; I've invested the small sum your father left you to such advantage, that in ten years it has more than doubled itself, and you, at twenty-one, have now an income of £100 a year, and—and——"

"And as a reward for all your trouble I was to have the privilege of becoming your wife," she interposed icily. "No thank you. If you wish me to carry out my promise don't say another word on what to me is the most unpleasant subject in the world. I refuse to listen."

She turned her face from her companion and stared into the frowziness of Waterloo Road. There was nothing to interest her there, indeed, to judge by her look of absorption, it is doubtful whether she saw anything. The Waterloo Road is not particularly inspiring at any time, and just now it was at its worst. The rain was coming down with a persistency which meant long continuance. It was the middle of an unusually wet July.

The girl's refusal to discuss the matter on which David Haggar had set his heart, and her cold manner, stirred all the combativeness in the old man's nature, and he had plenty of it. He was the architect of his own fortune, and this he had built up in the teeth of all the disadvantages of low birth, very little capital, and no influence.

Ignoring her determination not to renew the discussion, he went on to argue, but with a querulousness which showed that his patience was becoming exhausted. He had never been thwarted in anything upon which he had set his heart, and Alicia's stubbornness came upon him as an experience as unpleasant as it was novel. He had never imagined she would adhere to her refusal, although nominally the matter was settled some weeks before. Haggar apparently accepting her decision, told her that England had no further interest for him, and that he should return to his friends and business in the West Indies, but when after a little persuasion Alicia agreed to go with him as far as Southampton, he looked upon this concession as a prelude to consent.

To find that he had been buoying himself up with false hopes galled him to the quick. Hitherto he had been mild and persuasive, but his natural acerbity and habit of command were now beginning to assert themselves. To all his arguments and entreaties, however, the girl said not a word, and she kept her face turned from him.

The motor drew up at the main entrance to the station. By this time Haggar was boiling with anger, and, when he was angry—as those who knew him could testify—he quite lost his head, and

sometimes his good manners, so, when the porter outside the station opened the door of the motor, he scrambled out and shuffled over the miry pavement, taking not the slightest notice of the girl.

Alicia's face flushed slightly. She was in two minds whether to follow, but eventually she alighted and hastened to the booking office with the intention of preventing Haggar from purchasing two tickets. But she was too late.

She caught sight of his face. The tempest of rage was passing. There was something in his expression which excited her pity, if not her sympathy. She determined to fulfil her promise. She walked silently by his side to the departure platform. Her silk cloak touched him. The cloak was one of David Haggar's many presents to Alicia and was the envy of the lady residents of Talbot House, Queen's Gate. Its contact, or the sight of the girl herself, for she looked superbly handsome in it, brought back all Haggar's fury. He turned upon her:

"How long is this farce of silence to go on, Alicia?" he snarled.

"All the way to Southampton—if you choose. It depends upon yourself," she retorted.

Haggar drew in his breath with a hissing sound, as though her cold, contemptuous words strained his endurance almost to breaking point. He stopped opposite the open door of a first-class carriage.

"Let us get inside and talk over the matter quietly," said he. "There'll be two hours and a half before we reach Southampton—ample time to settle our differences."

"We have already settled our differences—as you're pleased to call them. If you mean to revive the ghosts of the old differences or make new ones I refuse to travel with you."

"And break your word? You who have so often boasted you've never yet failed to keep a promise once made," he sneered.

"Oh, I'll keep my word, Mr. Haggar. I'll go to Southampton to take that farewell you are so anxious about, but my promise doesn't bind me to travel in the same carriage with you."

A gleam of vindictive passion shot into the old man's pale eyes. He was standing inside the compartment, and in the light from the lamp above, his face looked grotesque. It was absolutely hairless and suggested a horrible likeness to some grinning mocking wooden idol of savagery.

"Really!" he exclaimed with a jeering laugh "One would almost think you were afraid."

Her reply was to wheel round with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders.

Meanwhile a young man, followed by a porter carrying a golf kit, a Gladstone bag, and a travelling rug, was sauntering along the platform with the leisurely nonchalance which goes with a comfortable balance at one's bankers and a freedom from care. The porter found an empty compartment for him, and deposited his luggage.

"Have I time for a drink?" said the passenger.

"You'll have to be sharp, sir. Train goes at eight o'clock. It's now five minutes to."

"All right."

The young man tipped the porter, rushed to the refreshment bar, then to the bookstall and returned

to his carriage with a supply of the literature supposed to be specially adapted to beguile the weariness of a long railway journey.

At that moment the clock was on the stroke of eight, and the mingled sounds—the hissing of steam, the din of voices, the rumble of luggage trollies, the rattle of cabs, the shrill yells of newspaper boys, the incessant patter of rain on the rambling roofs—seemed to be accentuated. An inspector approached Haggar's compartment.

"Tickets—Southampton? Right! If you're going lady, you'd better step in. Train's about to start."

The prosaic official, quite unconscious he had intruded himself into two lives at an acute crisis, and had arrested the course of each, having looked at the tickets, drew back to allow Alicia to enter. She had to decide at once whether she would go or stay.

"Alicia, I insist——"

It was enough. She turned abruptly and hastily drawing a shilling from her pocket, slipped it into the official's hand.

The man had had too many glimpses of the romance of life to be surprised at anything. He stolidly accepted the shilling and shut the door, locking it with a swift motion of the wrist. He caught sight of the old man's face convulsed with rage, and he concluded that the young and pretty woman had good reasons for not wishing to travel with her companion.

The ticket inspector would have put her into the next compartment. It had but one occupant, a man already preparing to go to sleep; he was pulling

down the flaps of his travelling cap. The lady dre
back directly her eyes lighted on the solitar
passenger and she shook her head. The next ha
dozen compartments were of the third class. Th
came a first-class carriage, empty, and the offici
opened the door for her. When she caught sight
a golf kit, a bag, and a travelling rug, she hesitate
but it was too late. She entered and behind h
followed the owner of the bag and rug with a bund
of periodicals under his arm.

She hastily went to the far end. Her fello
passenger deposited his literature on the seat, a
leisurely settled himself in his corner of the carria
The guard slammed to the door, his whistle sounde
and the train moved slowly out of the statio
saluted by a gust of wind that sent the rain again
the windows with a rattle like peas.

Eric Graydon, who had never had a roman
in his life, who had been born with a silver spoon
his mouth, whose four-and-twenty years had be
absolutely uneventful, who had never had occasi
to trouble about anything, looked with langu
curiosity at the lady, as, drawing her cloak abo
her with a shiver, she rested her head against t
padded corner.

At first Graydon was disposed to resent h
presence, since he was prevented from smokin
but this feeling of selfishness soon passed awa
In spite of himself he began to be interested in h
fellow traveller. Then after some furtive glanc
he tried to read his "railway literature," but
found it dull and stupid, and he began to wea
fancies, in which the lady at the other end of t
carriage was the central figure.

He was impulsive, good-natured, but about emotions he knew nothing. Life had gone so pleasantly and evenly with him, he had never been deeply stirred. Of course, he had had his flirtations, but in not one had there been any romance. The lawn tennis girl, the cycling girl, the yachting girl, the motoring girl, the golfing girl, he knew them all, and they were all alike—healthy, vigorous, fresh-coloured young women with plenty of self-possession, a self-possession which had neither repose nor mystery. They were quite ready to make conversation of a sort if you were deficient; they talked a little slang, and they had made up their minds on most subjects—that is to say, on subjects within their own world. Outside that world they knew nothing, and wanted to know nothing.

Graydon was going to a house party—golf in the day time, billiards and bridge at night—and he looked forv to both with no particular enthusiasm. He ha done the thing before, and he had no reason to suppose this house party would be different from any other. He would come back bronzed and under the impression he had had a good time, and the next thing to think about would be the moors and grouse, and after that partridges and pheasants. And so life for him went round.

It was nothing extraordinary that he should glance with interest at his fellow traveller, who was so different from any of the women he was accustomed to meet. She presented a picture fair to look upon—the face a perfect oval; the lines of the features harmonious; the colouring, fascinating in

the contrast of the masses of brown hair, glinte with copper, against the clear, pallid skin; th subdued tints of the complexion lit by the scarl of the full firm lips. The face was one that sugge ted mystery, romance, a life which could not commonplace wherever she might be. Adventur passion, the strife of emotion were mingled in h destiny.

She had apparently dropped into a slumber an for some time, was perfectly motionless, for t train at first went but slowly. Then the engine p on speed to make up for lost time, the carria surged, and the sleeper awoke with a start. S looked round, a kind of wild terror in her eyes, a a shiver went over her frame.

"You are cold," said Graydon, politely. "M I offer you my rug?"

She refused, but with a kind of mastery whi sat agreeably upon him, he insisted, and at last s consented.

Graydon tried to draw her into conversati but with not much success. He was conscious efforts were commonplace. The ordinary top with which he was familiar failed to interest h She answered him with perfect courtesy and wi out the slightest tinge of embarrassment, but t was all. The two passengers became silent, sim from sheer want of fuel to keep the fire of conver tion burning. There was no help for it. Gray had to bury himself in his literature again.

Every now and then he peeped over the top the book, but for any interest she took in him might as well not have been there. She awake—that was something; he could, with

being positively rude, see her large eyes, with a strange, dreamy, far-away look in them he had never seen in any woman's eyes before. Those eyes were singularly fascinating, and he wondered what colour they were. The yellow light of the lamp, the continually shifting motion of the carriage, gave him no assistance. She kept them constantly fixed straight before her, and, owing to the angle at which he was looking, he could not get a full view.

In vain he racked his brain to find a reasonable excuse for renewing the talk. He could think of nothing that did not savour of intrusion. Offer her part of his railway literature? It was vapid and tame even to him who had nothing to occupy his mind. It certainly would not tempt her. And the train rocked too much for reading, while the patter of the rain and the howling of the wind were far too distracting for concentrated attention.

To pass the time Graydon continued to study her furtively and ponder, as he had hitherto never pondered over a woman; and he pieced out a score of theories to account for that half-sad, half-defiant expression. The train usually took down a good many passengers for the ocean-going steamers starting from Southampton. Was the lady one of these travellers? Was she going to India or South Africa? Was she leaving behind her someone she loved very much?

But why should he think she was going abroad? Were there not a hundred reasons why people should travel to Southampton besides going out of England? He found himself hoping that one of these reasons might be the cause of her journey. And then he laughed at his folly. What was she to him?

Graydon had anticipated his journey would be tedious. It proved to be just the reverse. Basingstoke seemed to him but half-an-hour's ride from London, whereas the distance takes nearly an hour-and-a-half. He noticed the apathy of the lady change into restlessness as they neared the station. Would she alight there, or did she expect someone to meet her?

She rubbed the steamed glass and looked out into the darkness. Graydon shifted his seat and let down the window.

"What a horrible night!" he ventured to say.

"Yes, indeed!"

He did not fail to note the intensity of her tone. It was as though she were answering some thought rather than replying to his commonplace remark.

The next station was Micheldever. Graydon's observations about the weather had led to nothing; not a word had been exchanged since the train left Basingstoke. Then came Winchester. Graydon's fellow-passenger appeared to have lost her interest in the outer world. She remained in her motionless statuesque attitude, and did not avail herself of his offer to open the window.

At Winchester the train remained at the platform. Something was evidently amiss. One official, after looking in the window of a first-class compartment, shouted to another, but with the wind and hissing steam, Graydon could not hear what he said.

Soon there was quite a little group outside this particular carriage. The door was open, the guard was inside, and the others crowded round him, straining their necks to see what was going on. [illegible] lamp flashed on the face of one [illegible] looked white and scared.

"Something's the matter," said Graydon, raising his cap. "I'm going to see what's wrong."

She bowed with an indifferent air as much as to say he could do as he liked. He reached the carriage which was the object of so much interest. The men were blocking the way to the door, and he could not get near for a minute or so.

"Better take him on to Southampton," Graydon heard one say.

"But he'll have to be brought back again. Southampton's not the place where the thing was done."

"Who knows where it was done?"

"That's what the police'll have to find out. Anyhow it won't take more than five minutes to detach the carriage and shunt it."

The station master arrived, and the shifting of the little knot of people enabled Graydon to see the interior of the compartment. One glance was sufficient. He drew back with a shudder. A man was lying on the floor of the carriage with the ashen hue of death on his thin shrivelled face.

Meanwhile one of the porters had been running from carriage to carriage asking the question: "Is there a doctor here?"

One was found, and hurried to the spot. He bent over the prostrate figure, and shook his head.

"Can do nothing," said he in a low voice, "the man is dead."

"What is it?" asked somebody in the crowd who could not see. "Suicide?"

"Suicide!" retorted one of the officials. "Not a bit of it. Murder!"

CHAPTER II

THE STRANGE PHOTOGRAPH

At the dread word the crowd drew back instinctively. Until the official spoke, no one had thought of murder, yet of a certainty this was the only explanation. And not only murder, but robbery—watch, chain, purse, pocket-book, all were gone. The pockets were turned inside out.

And the murderer?

No answer could be returned to this vital question. Directly the station master discovered the nature of the tragedy he ordered all the exits to be closed. Messages were dispatched to the adjoining stations, announcing the detention of the train and the reason, and search was made for the possible assassin.

If it could be decided where the crime had been committed a clue might be at hand. This point was not easy to determine. Both at Basingstoke and Micheldever the guard had glanced at the carriage as he passed, and apparently it was empty. It was not until the train reached Winchester that he looked inside. All the time the murdered man must have been lying at the bottom of the compartment, and this would go to show that the murder had been perpetrated before the train arrived at Basingstoke.

The carriage contained three compartments; the middle one was the scene of the mysterious tragedy. The next where the passenger, with his travelling-cap pulled down over his eyes, was

preparing to go to sleep when the door was opened upon him at Waterloo, was empty, the remaining compartment was occupied by a couple of old ladies.

The emptiness of the next compartment was significant, for the guard could not recollect seeing anyone alight. What had become of the man in the travelling cap and ulster?

Graydon had, for the time being, forgotten his fellow-passenger in the horror of the discovery. When he did think of her, he determined not to say that a murder had been committed. It was too terrible. He came slowly back to find her in the doorway of the carriage, anxiety written on her face.

"What is it?" she asked him, almost sharply.

It was the first time he had seen the lady's eyes. He remained silent. Their wild beauty had taken possession of him.

"Why don't you speak?" she cried, suddenly becoming agitated.

"I beg your pardon, but—but I can scarcely tell you. An old gentleman has been taken ill, I fancy."

"An old gentleman," she repeated, and he saw her frame throb.

Before he could reply the guard, whom she had asked at Waterloo to put her in another carriage, appeared, lamp in hand.

"Was that old gentleman in the compartment you changed from at Waterloo a friend of yours, miss?" said he.

"A friend?" she answered hesitatingly, "no—well, yes. I suppose he may be called so."

"A very terrible thing has happened, and I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to identify him. There's nothing on his person to tell us who he is.

Sorry to trouble you, miss, on such a bad business, but it can't be helped," went on the guard, apologetically.

"Identify him?" she cried in great agitation. "I don't understand you unless—unless you mean that he has been seized with a fit?"

The guard coughed. He did not like to tell her the truth. She turned upon Graydon with a strange fierceness in her tones.

"You said he had been taken ill."

The guard looked at Graydon as though he would prefer to shift his unpleasant task on the shoulders of the young man. The girl's agitation was increasing, her face was perfectly white, her lips tremulous.

"Are you both dumb? Why can't you tell me what has happened—or must I see for myself? I suppose I *ought* to se[illegible]ne went on, in a low voice.

"No, no," interrupted Graydon putting out his arm. "Don't go. I'll tell you as well as I can. The poor gentleman's dead."

"Dead!"

She uttered the word in the lowest of whispers and stood looking from one to the other as though she had not comprehended its full sense.

"You were with the gentleman at Waterloo," said the guard with increasing gravity. "You got into the same carriage but you asked me to put you into another one. I want you to tell me his name."

"There may be some mistake," answered the girl. "I'd better see if the person who you say is dead, is really[illegible]"

She stopped, and rising from her seat, was about to descend the platform, when Graydon laid his hand gently on her arm.

"Pardon me," said he, "you don't know all. Is it necessary the lady should go now?" he went on, turning to the guard. "Later on, perhaps——"

"I don't know all! What else is there to know?" she cried quickly.

"Well, miss," said the guard, before Graydon could interpose. "It looks as if there had been some ugly work. He's been robbed, that's certain, and maybe murdered."

Graydon, fearing she was about to faint, held her arm tightly. But there was no cause for apprehension on this score. Almost immediately she recovered herself.

"You need not fear," said she in a tolerably firm voice. "I'm not given to fainting. Is—is the sight very terrible?"

"It isn't pleasant," said Graydon, shrugging his shoulders. "But the guard is right in asking you to identify him. You may help to furnish a clue to the miscreant who attacked him."

"Yes, yes. I will go."

Her momentary weakness had quite passed, and she walked steadily between the guard and Graydon to the scene of the tragedy. But there were signs of flinching when she reached the door, the gaping crowd making way for her, and she whispered hurriedly to Graydon

"Give me your arm, please."

He instantly obeyed, and he felt the hand within his arm quiver while she forced her eyes to rest upon the ghastly face of the old man, repulsive in life, doubly repulsive in death.

"Yes," she [illegible] shudd[illegible], "[illegible]."

Then Graydon heard her whisper with a sudden catch of the breath :

" Take me away, please."

" There's no necessity for the lady to remain, I suppose," said Graydon turning to the stationmaster.

" Just one moment. There mustn't be any mistake. Are you sure, madam, you recognise the poor gentleman ? " asked the official.

" Quite. His name is Haggar—Mr. David Haggar."

Graydon saw how she was suffering and he pitied her. The rain was beating down fiercely and there was no protection where they were standing. Risking opposition on the part of the stationmaster, Graydon led the girl beneath shelter. The stationmaster followed.

" You mustn't go away," said he in a warning tone.

A police inspector and a constable arrived at this moment and the stationmaster left Graydon and Alicia to themselves and joined the new comers. The officials entered the carriage ; the girl with white, drawn face, and hands pressed convulsively together, watched them in suspense. The young man could say nothing. It was not a time for talk. Presently the inspector came out of the carriage and approached Alicia, notebook in hand.

" I understand you've identified the deceased as Mr. David Haggar ? "

" Yes."

" And his address—where does he live ? "

The girl thought for a moment or two.

" He can hardly be said to live anywhere," said

she. "He's been staying at the Empress Hotel, London, and was on his way to Southampton. He intended to go by the next steamer to Kingston, Jamaica, but I don't know if he's booked his passage."

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Alicia Montrose."

"Any relative of the deceased?"

"No."

"The guard says you were with him at Waterloo. How came it you were not travelling with him? But you'd better come into the waiting room. And you too, sir," added the inspector looking at Graydon.

"By all means," said Graydon promptly.

He had not the slightest objection to being associated with a girl of so much mystery. It was the first time anything really serious had entered into his life, and, tragic though the story promised to be, the sense of adventure and romance was not unpleasant. The little crowd, eager to hear more, would have followed the inspector and the two passengers into the waiting room, but the railway officials foiled their curiosity.

The inspector renewed his questions and was particularly pressing to know why Miss Montrose travelled in a different carriage from that in which Mr. Haggar was found.

She declined to say.

"Had you quarrelled?"

"I refuse to answer. You are prying into what does not concern you," the girl cried hotly. "You had better occupy yourself in trying to solve the mystery of poor Mr. Haggar's death."

"That's what I'm doing," retorted the inspector, "and I want you to help me."

"How can such questions as you are asking me do that?"

Her eyes were suddenly turned on Graydon as if appealing to him for assistance. He promptly responded to her glance.

"The affair is one of robbery, I'm told," said he. "The lady is quite right to refuse to lend herself to a fishing enquiry."

"You know nothing about it," retorted the inspector curtly. "Please don't interfere."

Graydon bit his lip. He was tempted to resent what seemed to him to be insolence, but he felt the official was master of the situation. At the same time, it was humiliating to be snubbed before her.

"Please look at this photograph," suddenly said the inspector, producing a postcard picture from between the leaves of his notebook.

The girl took the photograph. No sooner had her glance rested upon it than the card fell from her fingers as though it were red hot. Graydon picked up the photograph and handed it to her. He could not but see the look of terror on her face.

"Have you ever seen the photograph before?" asked the inspector, watching her keenly.

"Where did you find it?" said she in a low, quivering voice.

"On the floor of the carriage. You haven't answered my question. Have you ever seen it before?"

"I—I think so."

"In the possession of the deceased?"

"It may have been his—but I really don't know. I can't tell you anything about it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, indeed."

Graydon had had a sight of the photograph. It had fallen from her hand face upwards. The picture was one well calculated to arrest the attention and dwell in the memory. It portrayed a pair of eyes simply—a woman's eyes, as the arrangement of the hair showed. The lower portion of the face was vignetted away. Whoever had taken the photograph was skilled in the art. The eyes, wonderfully large, luminous and expressive, were surmounted by brows, sufficiently irregular to denote character. Involuntarily Graydon's glance, as he handed the photograph, had gone from the eyes so vividly reproduced, to those of the living girl. They were identical! The sense of mystery was deepening. He wondered what the police inspector thought, but the official's stolid face gave him no clue.

"Do you know the original of this picture?" asked the inspector.

"Haven't I told you I know nothing about it? What's the use of pestering me?"

The inspector replaced the photograph within his notebook with the air of one who saw the uselessness of pursuing a clue which promised at present to yield no results. He wheeled round to Graydon.

"I understand you were travelling with this lady," said he.

"I was in the same carriage certainly. We travelled together from Waterloo," was the answer.

"Do you know her?"

"We are strangers. We met for the first time to-night."

"What is your name and address?"

The questioning of the girl's fellow passenger presented no difficulty: Eric Graydon, of Jermyn Street, son of Sir George Graydon, of Denby Court, Holmhurst, Surrey. The inspector here was on safe ground. Sir George Graydon was known to him by name as one of the Guildford bench of justices. In a somewhat more respectful manner he went on:

"The poor gentleman has been shot and——"

The girl uttered a low convulsive cry.

"Shot? Did he then commit suicide?" she gasped.

The question was a natural one for Alicia to ask. To die by his own hand might have been David Haggar's solace for his disappointment. If so, was she not morally guilty of his death? Her heart seemed to shrink at the thought.

The inspector would not commit himself.

"No pistol has been found, that's all I can say at present. The doctor must decide the rest. For the moment, you appear to be the only persons who can assist us. I must ask you to come with me to the police station."

"Surely, inspector, that isn't necessary," remonstrated Graydon. "This lady has no more to do with the death of the old man than I have. Can't you see that?"

"I can see nothing, Mr. Graydon, but my duty."

It was still raining hard and blowing hard. All the conveyances in the station-yard had been appropriated, and there was no alternative but to

walk. Fortunately the distance was not very far. Graydon opened his umbrella to shelter the lady, who had come unprovided. She accepted his politeness silently. During the whole way she uttered not a word, nor did Graydon. It was not a time for commonplace remarks, nor even for sympathy. Now and again he glanced at her face, and saw that it was as rigid and as white as when she was shown the photograph which had been found in the carriage.

They arrived at the police-station, where the news had already preceded them. The superintendent —seated at his table with the shaded lamp throwing its disc of light on the charge-sheet before him— motioned to one of his men to bring chairs. Then followed much questioning—a great deal of it being a repetition of the inspector's enquiries. He was particularly anxious to know what took place between Alicia and Mr. Haggar at Waterloo station, and what had led them to travel in separate compartments.

"All that I can tell you is that we had a slight difference, and in a sudden fit of temper, which I shall never cease to regret, I refused to travel with Mr. Haggar. Poor man, if I had not been so hasty——"

She stopped. There was a sob in her voice. It was clear that she attributed what had happened to her petulance. So, at least, Graydon thought.

The superintendent had come to the end of his tether so far as the lady was concerned, and he next turned his attention to Graydon. But of a necessity the latter had nothing to tell which could throw any light on the mystery, and the official, after two

or three apparently purposeless questions, desisted from further interrogation.

"You will have to stay in Winchester," said he. "The coroner will open an inquiry probably the day after to-morrow, and you'll be wanted as a witness."

"I shall be pleased to tell him all I know. Have you any further questions to ask me?"

"No, Mr. Graydon."

"Then will you be kind enough to recommend me to a good hotel?"

The superintendent named a house, and offered to send one of his men to show the way. Graydon expressed his thanks, and turning to Alicia, asked whether she cared to stay at the same hostelry.

"One is as good to me as another, so long as it is clean and comfortable."

"I can vouch for that," said the superintendent. "'The White Swan' is a house of the old-fashioned kind, where the proprietor does his best to make his customers feel at home."

Once more they tramped through the mud without exchanging a word, but just before they reached the hotel the lady, turning suddenly to Graydon, said: "How sorry I am I've dragged you into this terrible business of mine."

"It was an accident of fate, and doesn't matter so far as I'm concerned, but I am sorry for *you*," answered Graydon. "My time's my own, and it won't inconvenience me in the least to stay here for a few days."

He felt his reply was absolutely commonplace. He wanted to say something sympathetic, but he was like one groping in the dark. What was the

connection between an old man so repellant in appearance, and this girl, young, handsome, refined and clever? No woman with a face like hers, he was sure, could be a fool. Why was she so reticent concerning herself and Haggar, to whom she was not related? Why were they travelling together? What had led to their quarrel and the outburst of temper she had frankly admitted? Above all, what was the meaning of the mysterious photograph, the production of which evidently took her by surprise; why did she deny all knowledge of it when it was clearly a photograph of herself, of her wonderful eyes, at least.

They arrived at "The White Swan," a straggling old posting hotel with that inviting look of comfort which belongs to old English inns. A few whispered words from the constable to the waiter who opened the door—for it was past closing time—and the two travellers who had been so strangely and unexpectedly thrown together were admitted.

"Shall we go into the coffee-room?" suggested Graydon. "You must be fatigued after what you have gone through."

The girl hesitated, but finally said she would have a cup of tea, if such a thing could be got at that time of night.

Graydon ordered it, and presently the two found themselves in a low-ceilinged room, panelled, and with a bright fire blazing in the grate. He hoped that under the influence of their cheery surroundings they would become a little more friendly and confidential, but his advances did not receive much encouragement. He tried to make conversation, but found it difficult. He hesitated to allude to

the tragedy, and yet he well knew his companion could be thinking of nothing else.

Anyhow, he was glad to see, now that the first shock was over, she had lost that ghastly pallor which had made her look almost spectral. Of course, it may have been the faint tinge of colour was due to the ruddy glow of the fire, but the cause was of no importance, the fascinating effect was everything.

Presently the waiter brought in the tea, and the influence of the refreshment assisted in breaking down the barriers of constraint.

In a chatty way Graydon began to talk about himself, his tastes, and his aspirations. It no doubt sounded a little egotistical, but he risked this so long as he succeeded in diverting her thoughts from the ghastly object which, so far as they knew, was still lying on the floor of that blood-stained railway carriage. So he rattled on, telling her of the house-party he was on his way to join, when the journey had been so suddenly and unexpectedly interrupted.

She listened politely, and sometimes he thought he saw the ghost of a smile wreathe her lips. If he were right he was more than rewarded. Then the time came to part.

"Good-night, Mr. Graydon," said she sadly, but with perfect composure. "I sincerely trust this terrible affair won't keep you long from your friends. You can't help me any further, but I thank you for what you've done."

He held the door open for her, and she passed him with a graceful inclination of the head and a sudden raising of the eyelids, her whole being leaping to her eyes, as it seemed to him, in a way which was destined to dwell long in his memory.

The chambermaid, candle in hand, was awaiting Alicia, and the two ascended the broad staircase with its squat, quaint rails, to a long, narrow corridor, at the end of which was her room. The maid flung open the door. Like every other room in the house, it was somewhat low-ceilinged, panelled, and with a bow window. The fire blazing in the grate seemed to welcome her.

"I am glad you lighted a fire," said she.

"Yes, madam. The gentleman ordered it."

Of course it was Gravdon who was responsible for this thoughtfulness. She felt grateful to him for it. A man who could look ahead for the comfort of other people was not to be despised.

She dreaded going to bed. Her brain was excited—nay, fevered, and for several minutes she paced the room. Then drawing a comfortable, old-fashioned, cretonne-covered easy chair to the fire, she sank down wearily. After a while the long lashes were slowly lifted, the large, grey eyes gazed steadily at the dancing flames, but their dreamy, far-off expression showed that the fire flickered and danced in vain for any image it conveyed to the mind of the gazer.

"Dead! I can hardly believe it. Murdered! Oh, how terrible!"

She covered her eyes with her hands, and her whole body seemed to vibrate. For several minutes she remained thus, her elbows resting on the arms of the chair, her white fingers pressed tightly over her temples. What train of thought was passing through her mind it was hard to say, but naturally the effect of the death of David Haggar upon herself and upon her circumstances would come uppermost.

She was of age. Haggar had placed in her hands the securities representing the investments he had made for her. His responsibility as executor and trustee under her father's will had come to an end and she was independent. She had thrown away her chance of becoming an enormously rich woman by refusing to marry him; and really, whether he were dead or alive, could made no difference to her.

"He was about to leave England. In all probability we should never have met again. If this frightful thing hadn't happened and matters had taken their own course—for I could never have married him, no, never—he would practically have been dead to me. But that isn't it," she cried out desperately. "Oh, God, if—if——"

Distracting thoughts were tearing at her brain for she shuddered and her hands which had been covering her eyes as if to shut out some terrible picture, dropped despairingly.

"That act of madness—of infatuation—I've lived to repent it bitterly. Yet who would have supposed—perhaps I'm frightening myself needlessly after all."

Her nerves were completely unstrung. A slight noise—a mere scratching sound—sent her trembling from head to foot. She started from her half recumbent position and stared with feverish distended eyes into the darkened end of the room.

She listened, every nerve strained, till the tension became positive agony. The noise was repeated—it was simply the scratching of a mouse behind the wainscot. There was nothing to alarm her, it only served to break the chain of her thoughts, and with a deep sigh, she crept to bed and tried to sleep

CHAPTER III

THE MAN IN THE ULSTER

THE morning broke fair and sunny. All trace of the storm was gone, save the broken branches here and there and the shining pools of water in the Hampshire lanes.

Meanwhile, the police had been busy. Telegraphic messages had been flashing up and down the line all night long. The various police-stations in Hampshire and Surrey were all agog with the golden instructions which had been forwarded to them relative to the "murder in the 8.5 London train" as the telegrams put it. Scotland Yard was excitated, and was sending out its arms octopus-like to grasp the murderer if he came within their reach.

But all efforts were unavailing, and the mystery was only deepened when the clues of suspicion were reduced to one—to discover what had become of the man in the ulster and travelling cap, who had occupied the compartment in which the tragedy had been enacted. Not a solitary official could be produced who had seen him get out at any of the stations at which the train had stopped. Most assuredly he was in the train when it left Waterloo, yet he had vanished as completely as though he had never existed.

But the guard and the engine driver were able

to state something which might throw a light on the mystery. They said the signals were against them just before the train reached Basingstoke. There was a delay of quite ten minutes—ample time for the man to escape.

Graydon saw nothing of Miss Montrose the next morning. He was told that she was not well, and was remaining in her room, and the announcement did not surprise him. He had plenty to do for a couple of hours in the way of letter-writing—it was necessary to explain to his own people and to the friends who had been expecting him, how he came to be so intimately associated with what promised to turn out an affair of considerable public interest.

He had only just finished this somewhat embarrassing task, when the coroner's officer called with two blue official-looking pieces of paper, one for himself and one for Miss Montrose—subpœnas, in fact, summoning both to appear before the coroner. It had leaked out that Eric was Sir George Graydon's son, and Mr. Moggett, the coroner's officer, was deferential in his demeanour in consequence and smiled affably when Graydon suggested that a drink might be acceptable.

"Well, sir," said Mr. Moggett, with an apologetic cough, "seein' as how the police say you bean't connected with either of the parties, I don't see as there'd be any harm."

"Harm—of course not. What will you have?"

Moggett named his drink, and, having served the subpœnas, and not having anything to do for an hour or so, he was not at all averse from gossiping to the accompaniment of the "Swan's" humming ale. The case was one in which the police took

all the trouble of collecting evidence off his shoulders; nevertheless, he shared in the importance of the business, and was all the more willing to talk about it. This was Graydon's object in loosening Mr. Moggett's tongue.

"The police say as it looks as if it be going to turn out a big job," said Moggett, with an air of mystery.

"Why, of course. Robbery and murder are no trifles—especially on a railway. Such a thing might happen to anybody. No wonder the police are working hard."

"That bean't quite what I mean," rejoined Moggett, rubbing his chin. "It's the young lady in the case as'll give 'em trouble."

"Oh, it's what one might expect. I daresay, Mr. Moggett, your experience has told you that wherever there are women, trouble's bound to follow."

"You be right, sir, and well I knows it."

Mr. Moggett buried half his rubicund face in the tankard. Graydon had unwittingly touched him on a tender spot. It was well known that Mrs. Moggett was by far the better horse.

"Still, I don't see what possible connection Miss Montrose has with the horrible affair, certainly not more than, for instance, I have," said Graydon, hiding his anxiety under a mask of carelessness.

"P'raps not, sir, I hope not, but there be certain things about the case as are rum, decidedly rum. Tom Winch—he's the guard of the train, you know, sir—he's a Winchester man, an' I served him with his subpœna afore I brought you yours. I had a bit of a talk with him, and he told me all about the young lady tipping him a shilling to put her in

another carriage, rather than travel with the old gentleman. What did she do that fur? I s'pose, Mr. Graydon, she didn't tell *you*?"

Mr. Moggett drooped his eyelids and glanced at Graydon cunningly between the slits. The coroner's officer was disposed to do a little detective work on his own, just to show the police he was as cute as they were. Graydon knew perfectly well what the question meant and what was passing in the man's mind, and he played up to him.

"Not a word, but no doubt if you're once on the right track you'll soon find out. Indeed, I shouldn't be surprised if you didn't know already. That, of course, is the advantage of training and experience."

"Oh well, Mr. Graydon, I bean't often wrong arter I get my facts well in hand and begin to sift 'em. That's the way as I work. Just take this 'ere case. I starts with the girl a going down to Southampton with the old chap. What fur?"

"That will be explained, surely. Miss Montrose will tell the coroner no doubt."

"I don't say she won't. Maybe the police'll find out as well. I happen to know they're making enquiries at the boarding-house where she's been staying for some time. Whatever it was, it's certain they had a row just before the train started and she whisked off. Tom Winch says as he opened the door of the next compartment for her, but she wouldn't go in. Why wouldn't she? It bean't fur me to answer, but here's the curious fact—in that there compartment the chap as we wants to find—him in the ulster and travellin' cap—was a sittin.'"

"Oh, you ass," muttered Graydon. "It doesn't

occur to you that any woman travelling by herself would have done the same thing."

"There mayn't be anything in it, but there's the fact all the same. Now what about the photygraph as Winch found in the carriage? That's the most sing'lar thing as we've come across as yet. Our superintendent down here says the young lady swears that she'd never seen it before."

"That's not so," hastily interposed Graydon. "You forget I was present when Miss Montrose was questioned. What she said was that she knew nothing about it."

"It's much the same thing so fur as the facts be concerned. What do you think Tom Winch says?"

"How should I know?" returned Graydon, with a strange sinking of the heart.

"Why, that the photygraph is the girl's own self."

Graydon expected this. But he was not going to show his uneasiness.

"What of it?"

"Nothing if she hadn't said she knowed nought about it."

"There are such things as snapshots. Heaps of people have been photographed without their knowledge."

"I know, but this bean't no shapshot. P'raps you haven't seen it. It's only her eyes as have been took, but lor, she's got eyes as can't be mistook. I had a good look at 'em when I served the subpœna. Stood some time a talking to her a purpose. It's *her* eyes, sure enough. Now then, how come that picter into the carriage? There was only two in

the carriage, bear in mind, the poor old gentleman and the scoundrel who attacked him. One or t'other must ha' dropped it in the struggle. That's the fact as the coroner 'll have to drive home."

"You're very shrewd, Mr. Moggett," said Graydon, with an attempt—a very poor one—to appear at ease, "but I can't help thinking that you're making mystery where none exists."

"Well, we shall see, Mr. Graydon. You won't forget, ten o'clock sharp to-morrow. Good mornin', sir."

Graydon was left to ponder over what the coroner's officer had said. There was nothing new about his facts; it was the conclusion to be drawn from them which was so disquieting. To that conclusion he had himself come before he heard Moggett's version, and to find that the man agreed with him was almost startling. Of course, if Miss Montrose chose to deny that the eyes in the photograph were *her* eyes, there was no one to contradict her. The resemblance after all was a matter of opinion.

He went into the coffee room to lunch. He cast a look of disappointment at the table. It was laid for one only. He had hoped Miss Montrose would have joined him. He enquired how she was of the neat waitress who was hovering about the room.

"She is better, I believe, sir."

"Won't be down to lunch, I suppose?"

"No, sir. I am to take her a cup of tea and an egg presently."

Graydon sat down to his cold roast beef and salad, but hardly knew or cared what he was eating, so troublous were his thoughts. It was a relief to

light his pipe and saunter into the pretty, old-fashioned garden revelling in its wealth of colour. He paced the neatly-kept bowling green, whose level surface was the product of the rolling and cutting for numberless times during quite a hundred years. Then he sat down on a rustic seat and tried to answer the question continually facing him—what was to be the end of the mystery?

"I'm afraid you're regretting your lost opportunities at golf, Mr. Graydon."

Graydon started to his feet and raised his cap. Alicia Montrose had approached unobserved, thanks to the soft, velvetty turf.

"Frankly, no; but I am sorry, deeply sorry, for the cause. Are you better?"

"Thanks—a little. I feel more composed, but it will be a long time, I fear, before I forget this terrible tragedy—if, indeed, I ever do."

The eyes were overcast with a sadness which Graydon was convinced was mingled with fright. His own eyes had instinctively sought hers. He was trying to remember what they were like in the photograph. Totally different, he decided—but then, so much depended upon expression, and these grey orbs of hers were capable of an infinity. They responded to every varying emotion. Just now they seemed to be appealing to him for sympathy, for help.

"I suppose you've telegraphed to your friends?" said he.

"No. I know no one likely to be of any use."

"But your solicitor—that is, if you have one," he urged.

"I believe Mr. Haggar's lawyer has been com-

municated with. The police superintendent called on me very early, and I told him to do so."

"And will this lawyer act for you?"

"Act for me? I don't quite understand. I am simply a witness, you know—like yourself."

"Exactly, but it's sometimes better to have skilled advice ready to hand. A coroner isn't so much bound by the strict rules of evidence as a counsel. He might ask questions which a lawyer would protect you against. I mean—I hardly know how to put it—that some of the questions might prove embarrassing. They might have reference to your private affairs."

A look of distinct alarm leaped to her face.

"Oh, I hope not. The enquiry doesn't go beyond finding out the cause of death, does it? The superintendent was good enough to tell me as much as that."

"Yes, that's so, but sometimes one thing leads to another. An incautious answer may open up new channels of enquiry."

Graydon wanted to guide the conversation to the photograph. He had come to the conclusion that she ought to reconsider her denial, that is, if the picture really represented her.

She was silent for quite a long time, as though she were turning his words over in her mind. Then she said abruptly:

"I don't see that it is necessary to have a solicitor. What questions can the coroner put to me that I cannot answer?"

"Pray don't think I am suggesting the contrary. I only judge from what the superintendent said to

you last night in the station. The guard seems to have indulged in a good deal of gossip."

"About what, may I ask?"

Graydon could see no way other than speaking out.

"About the photograph he found in the carriage."

"Ah, the photograph," she echoed, with a quick catching of the breath. "Well, and what has he been saying?"

"That it's the photograph of yourself. Others have been saying the same thing. The coroner's officer, for instance. You will be closely questioned on that point."

"I shall have nothing to say beyond what I have said. I can tell the coroner no more than what I've told the superintendent."

The words were quietly spoken—almost too quietly. One would have thought that unjust suspicions would have excited a little indignation.

"Have you seen this much talked of photograph?" she went on.

"Yes. I caught sight of it for an instant last night."

"And what do you think?"

The question forced him to look straight into her eyes. She met his glance fearlessly. He was much more embarrassed than she. He answered evasively:

"I saw the photograph for such a short time that I should not like to speak positively. All I can say is that I thought it bore a resemblance to yourself."

"A resemblance? Well, there's nothing extraordinary in that."

She did not say this at once and Graydon watched her anxiously.

"I hope you don't mind my alluding to the subject," said he. "You see I'm anxious to prevent a surprise being sprung upon you to-morrow. You don't want a wrong construction to be placed upon anything you may have done or may say."

"I don't understand you," said she. "I've done nothing."

"I'm not saying you have. I'm only thinking of what any of the witnesses may say you did. The guard, for instance. His evidence will be regarded as of great importance. He will tell the coroner as he told the police superintendent: that after you turned from the compartment in which you had left Mr. Haggar, you objected to enter the next one because of the passenger you saw seated there."

"What of that? Most women would have done the same thing."

"True, but you may be asked if you had any motive other than the natural reluctance you speak of."

"No doubt, but such a question surely wouldn't take me by surprise."

"Possibly not, but as suspicion seems for the moment to be directed towards this man, every scrap of evidence affecting him, no matter how trivial, will be sifted thoroughly. Now——"

At that moment the fat landlord came from the house and walked rapidly towards them. His face, his manner, his walk even suggested that he was the bearer of important news.

"A man's just come into the bar," he began breathlessly, "who says an ulster and a travelling

cap's been found floating in the Basingstoke Canal. I thought you'd like to know at once. I believe the police talk of dragging the canal and may be the water'll be drawn off between the locks."

There was no need for the landlord to explain why.

Graydon dared not look at Alicia. If the conclusion to be drawn from the startling news should be justified, it could hardly be reconciled with the theory of murder for the sake of robbery pure and simple. Of course, the fellow might well be anxious to destroy the evidence of identity which might lead to his capture, but why should the police think of dragging the canal? Ordinary thieves are not as a rule anxious to commit suicide. But if there was a suspicion that the motive was other than robbery, then dragging the canal might drag the secret of the tragedy to light. But for the moment all was conjecture, and turning to the landlord, Graydon said abruptly:

"Is the man you speak of gone?"

"No, sir, I left him in the bar. Everybody's buzzing about the chap."

"I'd like to have a talk with him, too. Excuse me, Miss Montrose——"

But Alicia was gone. While Graydon and the landlord were talking, she had disappeared into the house. Why had she gone at such a critical moment? Perhaps she did not hear the landlord's words. Yet they were spoken loudly enough. However, Graydon did not delay to consider the point, but went with the landlord to the bar. The man, a farm labourer, was surrounded by a little group of gossips, and Graydon questioned

him but could learn little more than he had told the landlord. It turned out that the man had not been an eyewitness of the "find," and could only repeat what he heard.

When the fellow was gone, Graydon strolled into the garden, hoping to find Alicia. But he was disappointed. He was coming back to the house when he met one of the maids.

"Oh, sir, Miss Montrose has asked me to excuse her leaving you without saying anything," said the girl. "She had a sudden return of her headache and felt that she must lie down."

"I'm very sorry. Will you tell her that if she gets better in the course of the day, I should like to see her."

The maid tripped away, and to employ his time Graydon sauntered to the police station to ascertain if the labourer's story was true. He found the inspector very non-communicative, but the official admitted that a cap and ulster *had* been found.

The day passed wearily enough for Graydon. Alicia was too unwell to leave her room, and he concluded that she was resting in order to prepare for the trying ordeal of the morrow, when the coroner would open his enquiry.

CHAPTER IV

ALICIA EXPLAINS

GRAYDON was looked upon as such an important personage that at breakfast the next morning the landlord waited upon him personally.

"No news, sir, about the discovery in the canal," said he. "According to the papers, the police are still searching. But, of course, they'll hold their tongues and make out as they've got a clue."

"How is Miss Montrose?" asked Graydon abruptly.

"Well, sir, I thought she looked very ill and worried. She went out about a quarter of an hour ago. She told me that the coroner's officer wanted to see her early. I believe between you an' me, sir," went on the landlord, dropping his voice, "that she'll have to look at the body. She's got to identify it."

Graydon started. It had not occurred to him that possibly no one but Alicia could perform this repugnant duty. His second thought was that she was wonderfully self-reliant. It would have been only natural if she had asked him to accompany her on her gruesome errand. But evidently she preferred to act alone, or maybe she did not care to trouble him. He was sorry. He would have liked to be of service to her.

"Yes, poor young lady," continued the landlord,

"it's an unpleasant business for her and a bit mysterious too. But I suppose the coroner'll have it all out and when the story's told there mayn't be nothing in it. The papers do magnify things so."

Graydon was not due at the inquest before ten. It was hardly five minutes walk to the "Blue Posts," a commercial inn, in the club-room of which the inquest was to be held, but he set out at half-past nine in the hope of seeing Alicia and having a chat with her before the proceedings commenced.

A little crowd of loafers was hanging round the "Blue Posts," a plain, unpretending, brick hostelry, and Graydon elbowed his way through the bar and up the narrow staircase. On the landing he was met by Moggett, the coroner's officer, very important, very fussy, and with the air of a general in command.

"That's right, Mr. Graydon," he whispered. "Nothing like being in time. The coroner starts sharp to the minute. I've got a seat for you close to the jurymen's table."

"Is Miss Montrose here?"

"Yes, she's with the landlady. She was a bit upset—identifying the deceased, you know—so I thought I wouldn't call her till she was wanted."

Graydon could have nothing to say to this. At the same time he was disappointed at not having the chance of a word or two with her before the proceedings commenced.

The club-room was a spacious apartment extending the entire breadth of the first storey, with a sawdust-besprinkled floor, a leather-covered settee running round three sides of the room and oak window seats.

Its furniture consisted of a long table, its surface scarred with the ring marks of countless pots and glasses; a score and a half of Windsor chairs, and a dilapidated piano; whilst its walls were adorned with a few old sporting prints—prize fights of almost forgotten days, the Exeter Highflyer at full speed, a cricket match with the players in top hats and high collars, not to mention a couple of smoky canvases, whereon were portrayed two gentlemen, exceedingly alike in the matter of blue coats, bolster cravats, perch-like frills, faces clean-shaven save for a scrap of side whisker, and ruddy cheeks common to most masculine portraits dating from the second decade of the nineteenth century.

Only the jury, a handful of reporters, a police inspector and a sedate elderly gentleman with a decidedly legal aspect, were in the room. Nobody else would Moggett admit until the coroner arrived.

Graydon took his seat, wondering at his surroundings—a combination of the "trade" and a "coroner's 'quest"—and Moggett whispered to the elderly gentleman. Apparently Graydon was the subject of their talk, for Moggett turned his face once or twice in Graydon's direction, and finally the elderly gentleman rose and came across to where Graydon was sitting.

"You are Mr. Eric Graydon, the coroner's officer tells me," said he. "My name is Perry—Perry and Latimer, of Warwick Court, Grays Inn. We were the late Mr. Haggar's solicitors. I should like to have a word with you."

"By all means? Are you here on Miss Montrose's behalf?"

He was hoping that Alicia had adopted his advice and wired for legal assistance.

"Oh dear no. I know Miss Montrose and her relations with Mr. Haggar, but I've had no instructions from her. The coroner communicated with us and asked me to attend to identify the deceased, which, of course, I did, in company with Miss Montrose. You, I understand, met Miss Montrose casually in the train. You were not previously acquainted?"

"Certainly not. She chanced to get into the same carriage."

"You had not seen her on the platform with Mr. Haggar?"

"No, indeed."

Mr. Perry fingered his chin and looked a little embarrassed.

"It might have explained a good deal if you had," said he hesitatingly.

"Explained what?"

"Why she chose to leave Mr. Haggar and travel alone. We needn't mince matters, I take it, Mr. Graydon, and I suppose I shan't offend you if I suggest that you're a man who might chance to attract the attention of a good-looking young woman like Miss Montrose, and so possibly to excite the jealousy of an old man who was deeply attached to her."

"I haven't the least idea what you're trying to insinuate, Mr. Perry."

"I'm not insinuating anything. I'm only looking at possibilities. You don't know, perhaps, that Miss Montrose is, correctly speaking, was—Mr Haggar's ward?"

"I know nothing whatever about Miss Montrose—absolutely nothing. I should take it as a great favour if you would remove a little of my ignorance."

Mr. Perry's shrewd eyes twinkled at Graydon's eagerness.

"Of course—of course. Undeniably she is very handsome, but also—very foolish, or she wouldn't have thing away the chance she had of marrying a man who was worth a million if he was worth a penny."

"Do you mean Mr. Haggar?"

"My dear sir, whom else could I mean?" rejoined the lawyer, a little testily. "But if she was foolish in refusing, I'm bound to say the old man was doubly foolish in wanting to marry her. Nothing but trouble could have come of such a marriage, that is, if Mr. Haggar didn't die before a twelve-month was out. I've had a few opportunities of judging Miss Montrose's character, and my opinion is that the man who marries her will have to be her master. She'll never hesitate to take her own course no matter where it may lead her."

"I'm inclined to agree with you there," said Graydon slowly.

"Oh, you've already cause to think that? Perhaps it may also have occurred to you as a man of the world that she has a pair of eyes that would lead a man to the devil if she felt inclined to take him in that direction."

"The idea hasn't occurred to me at all. All that *has* occurred to me is that her eyes are exceptionally beautiful, and don't seem to give the slightest key to her character—least of all to such a character as your words imply."

"My dear Mr. Graydon you've hit upon the very thing that makes her so attractive. I'm supposed to be a hard-headed lawyer, but being so, I'm in the position of a looker-on at life's little dramas, and lookers-on see most of the game. What is the kind of woman that all men run after? The one who is a mystery, an enigma, who never gives herself away or loses her head, who is always exciting curiosity. Curiosity is a great moving power in this world. I'll take *you*, for instance—I daresay you'd like to see Miss Montrose really in love. What would she say—what would she do—how would she behave towards the man who succeeded in gaining her love—in other words, towards the man strong enough to tame her?"

Graydon laughed uneasily. Mr. Perry had reproduced some of his thoughts with an accuracy which was simply amazing. But the lawyer, of course, might have grounds for such an analysis. What were they? He put the question.

"No grounds at all—that is to say, no direct grounds. Didn't I tell you that women like Alicia Montrose never betray themselves? You have to judge by what they *don't* say rather than by what they do say. But the upshot of this talk on what I believe is called the 'sex problem' is that had you two met on the platform and looked at each other, there *might*—I don't say there *would*—have been an adequate reason for her electing to leave David Haggar to travel by himself."

"I don't know, Mr. Perry, whether you mean to be complimentary to me, but if so, it's confoundedly uncomplimentary to Miss Montrose, and I don't thank you for your theoretical views. It's very

clear the two quarrelled, and the subject of their quarrel doesn't matter a button."

"I beg your pardon. It does matter. Had any set of circumstances happened as I suggest, an explanation would have been ready to hand, but as matters stand an explanation won't be so simple as you seem to imagine, at least that's the notion of the police."

"Oh, confound the police. They——"

Graydon's words were broken off by the entry of the coroner, a stout man with a florid face, iron-grey hair, an unctuously authoritative voice, who bustled in, talking to his subordinate as he approached the table. The jury, a dull uninteresting set of men, bobbed up out of respect to the representative of the Crown, and waited until he had subsided into the high-backed armchair (occupied once a week by the "primo" of a branch of the Ancient Order of Buffaloes) before they sat down. Then the rustics streamed into the room and packed every inch of the small space available for the public.

Inquests as a rule are dreary affairs. One misses the spirit of battle which gives a criminal trial its interest. The coroner has everything his own way, and sometimes his own law into the bargain. The gentleman who presided over the proceedings at the "Blue Posts" was a little overpowered by a sense of importance. He felt he was under the public eye, not merely of Winchester, but of the whole of England. The result was that he did not always discriminate between material and immaterial points, and, of course, wasted a good deal of time.

It so happened that the first witness was the most

interesting, and the one everyone was anxious to see and hear—Alicia Montrose. The identification of the deceased was a business which preceded everything, and this brought Alicia before the coroner at an early stage of the proceedings. She entered not by the public door communicating with the staircase, but by a door leading to the private quarter of the house, and a buzz of excitement went through the room as the coroner's officer cleared a way for her to approach the table. She was pallid but perfectly composed, and answered the preliminary questions with great steadiness.

She told the coroner that the deceased was her guardian, and that he had looked after her ever since she was eleven years old, when her father died, her mother having then been dead some six years. Until she was twenty, she was at the boarding-school at which Mr. Haggar had placed her, and for three years she had been what was called a "parlour boarder."

Just before Mr. Haggar came to England from Jamaica, she left the school and stayed at a boarding house at Queen's Gate. Mr. Haggar resided at the boarding house for about three weeks. Previous to that he had stayed at the Empress Hotel, near Charing Cross, and after leaving the boarding house he went back to the Empress.

"Were you always on good terms with the deceased?" asked the coroner.

"Yes—the best of terms. Why should I not have been? He was always extremely kind and generous. I owe a good deal to Mr. Haggar."

"How came you to be travelling with him to Southampton?"

"Mr. Haggar was returning to Jamaica, and he asked me to accompany him as far as Southampton, as it was probably the last time he would see me. He came from the Empress Hotel and called at the boarding-house for me. I went with him to Waterloo."

"But you did not travel with him in the same carriage. How was that?"

"We had a slight difference while on the journey from Queen's Gate to Waterloo, and, owing to his persistency I'm afraid I lost my temper, and, unfortunately, took a step which I shall for ever regret. You see, the train was on the point of starting and I had not time to consider what I was doing. Then the storm became so violent that I could hardly go back to his carriage at any of the stations at which the train stopped."

"How do you reconcile this 'difference' as you call it, with what you said just now—that you were on the best of terms with the deceased?"

"There was only one subject on which we did not agree, and, unhappily, Mr. Haggar brought it up at the last moment."

"What was the subject?"

"Am I obliged to answer that question?"—after a pause.

"I think you had better—for your own sake."

"Very well. Mr. Haggar was very desirous that I should marry him, and I refused. He asked me more than once, and my answer was always the same. Then he said he should return to Jamaica and end his days there. I had hoped his mind was quite settled on the point, or I should not have promised to go with him to Southampton. Un-

happily, as I've told you, he renewed his proposal at the last moment, and I was angry. The prospect of a long journey under such unpleasant circumstances made me resolve to find another carriage. I admit I was hasty."

Alicia's explanation sounded quite natural. It solved the puzzle of her leaving the old man to travel by himself. Most high-spirited young women would have acted in the same way. To Graydon her story came with a sense of relief. The solicitor's cynical suggestion that she was light in behaviour had left behind it an unpleasant impression, and he was glad to hear how frankly she spoke.

"I wish she had said as much to me," was his only regret.

The coroner paused for some time before he asked the next question. Then he said, somewhat abruptly:

"A photograph was found on the floor of the carriage where the deceased was lying—can you tell the jury anything about it?"

"Certainly. The photograph was mine—that is to say, it is a photograph of myself. It must have fallen from Mr. Haggar's pocket during the struggle, or perhaps when the thief was searching him."

"The photograph then was in Mr. Haggar's possession?"

"Yes."

"But didn't you say at the police station that you knew nothing about it?"

"Quite true. I thought the police were busying themselves over something which had nothing to do with the affair, and I would give them no informa-

tion concerning the photograph. I have since thought over the matter, and I now think they were right and I was wrong."

So, that which had been the subject of so much gossip and conjecture had resolved itself into nothing! Moggett, the coroner's officer, looked especially discomfited. His house of cards had toppled over. The mystery was no mystery at all.

The coroner was holding the photograph while he was putting his questions, and now and again looked at it as though making comparisons. After Alicia had given her explanation, he handed the picture to the jury, who passed it from one to the other, each one like the coroner casting a glance at the witness. No one made any remark until the photograph came to the last of the jurymen.

"There be something written at the back, Mr. Coroner. 'To F.V.' it looks like, Mr. Coroner. What do them two letters mean?" said Mr. Perfitt.

"Perhaps the witness can tell you," was the coroner's reply. "What do you say, Miss Montrose?"

"I decline to gratify that gentleman's curiosity. The writing on the postcard has nothing whatever to do with the enquiry."

The juryman refused to be crushed.

"Now, miss, you know that bean't a proper answer. We've come from our businesses to find out the truth, the whole truth, and nothen' but the truth. I'm a going to put my question agen."

Alicia scorned to reply. She turned the battery of her eyes appealingly on the coroner. He could not resist.

"I agree with the witness," said he, "and if she chooses to be silent, I think she is within her rights."

The juryman sat down disappointed. The rest were inclined to glory in his defeat, especially the foreman, who thought Perfitt, who was a barber and whose shop was in a back street, was taking too much on himself. The coroner resumed his examination.

"Miss Montrose, I want you to carry your memory back to your refusal to travel in the same carriage with the deceased. What happened when you turned away?"

"I asked the guard to put me in another carriage."

"Did you object to go into the next compartment?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"There was only one passenger, and I wanted to travel by myself or where there were several passengers."

"This passenger you speak of was a man, was he not?"

"Yes."

"How was he dressed?"

"I did not take much notice. I believe he wore an ulster."

"Can you describe him? What was he like?"

"I don't know. He had his cap drawn over his eyes. I turned away directly I saw him."

"Are you aware that an ulster and a travelling cap have been found in the Basingstoke Canal?"

"I read so in the paper this morning."

The coroner beckoned to his officer, and Moggett produced a shrunken and distorted garment and cap with flaps.

"Do you see any resemblance between this

ulster and the one the man in the carriage you refused to enter, was wearing ? "

" I really don't remember. I've told you I took very little notice of the man. The cap seems the same."

The coroner had no more questions to ask, and when Alicia retired from the table, all vital interest in the enquiry seemed to depart. Mr. Perry as one who had identified the deceased, was next called, and he corroborated what Alicia had said in reference to Mr. Haggar's desire to make her his wife. Two questions the coroner put which appeared to have very little bearing on the tragedy, and yet everyone listened to the answers with strained attention.

" Was Mr. Haggar a rich man ? " was the first question.

" Very rich," said Mr. Perry, with emphasis.

" Do you know if he had made his will ? "

" I am unable to say. He spoke about it several times but never gave us definite instructions. He was very methodical and not likely to neglect such an important duty, but at the time when he spoke to me, he was perplexed concerning Miss Montrose."

" In what way ? "

" I fancy the terms of the will would have depended upon her decision in regard to marriage, but I cannot speak with certainty."

Graydon was glad to hear this. It set at rest any question of Alicia Montrose benefiting by Haggar's death. About the photograph he was not so clear. He could not understand why she had not at once owned up when tackled by the police superintendent. However, she had now told her story and here the matter must rest.

[illegible]on, the guard, the doctor, the station-master, and the police inspector, gave their evidence but said nothing which suggested to the jury that the motive of the assassin was other than robbery. The inspector's story was conclusive on this point. The pockets were empty, watch and chain were gone, and so also was a valuable ruby which the guard noticed at Waterloo, the deceased was wearing in his black satin scarf. The pin which had an arrangement attaching it to the scarf at the back had been left behind, and the gem violently wrenched away. The engine driver explained how the train stopped before entering Basingstoke station, thus giving the man an opportunity of escaping.

The sole mystery remaining to be solved was that attached to the ulster and travelling cap. Was the owner the passenger who sat in the compartment next to Mr. Haggar's, and if so, why were th[illegible] in the canal? To the first question the guard returned an unhesitating "Yes;" to the second the police could give no answer.

Nothing more could be dealt with that day, declared the coroner, when his officer had exhausted his list of witnesses. The inquest was, therefore, adjourned to permit the police to pursue their inquiries, and the crowd stumbled down the staircase, feeling that they had been defrauded of the "revelations" they expected.

The police made their enquiries, but they led to nothing. The pistol was missing. The ruby and watch and chain were not traced, the water was run off between the locks on that part of the canal where the ulster and travelling cap were found but no discovery was made.

CHAPTER V

"I SHALL NEVER—NEVER FORGET"

THE inquest was adjourned again and again until the coroner declared that no useful purpose would be served by keeping it open any longer, and the jury returned the only possible verdict—wilful murder against some person or persons unknown.

The last sitting of the jury was little more than formal. Everybody knew the mystery was as far off being solved as ever, and that the coroner's jury had nothing more to investigate. The club-room was no longer packed with an eager-eyed, gaping crowd, and the verdict was announced to few more than those concerned in the case—the witnesses, the police, the railway officials, and the reporters.

Eric Graydon accompanied Alicia to the court. It was for the last time, and he scarcely knew whether to feel thankful or not that the inquiry was over. These journeys from the hotel to the old inn, where the inquest was held, had been full of a strange romantic interest; the more so, perhaps, because life to him had hitherto been simply a round of idle pleasure.

Though they had become friends he knew very little more about her so far as any personal confidence on her part was concerned, than when he tried to beguile time in the railway carriage on that fateful journey from London. He had without

doubt been of service to her, and she had thanked him warmly, but these services did not encourage her to talk about herself. And now the time had come for them to part. The chain that bound them together was broken; he would go his way, she her's. There was no mystery about his path. It was easy to slide back into his former aimless life.

Easy? Impossible. Could he forget Alicia Montrose? He had studied her as he had never studied woman before. She was charming in all her moods, and she had many. He remembered every one, and cherished the remembrance. The world of pleasure and inanity no longer presented its former attraction. Romance he scarcely dared to call it love—possessed him.

It was early in the afternoon when they came out of the "Blue Posts," and maybe the fresh sweet air, the bright sunshine, the serenity of the pleasant autumn day had something to do with the quiet, composed expression which stole over Alicia's face. It was, thought Eric Graydon, no longer so drawn and anxious as hitherto.

They walked side by side along the High Street, Eric now and again glancing at her doubtfully, as though some request were on the tip of his tongue which he scarcely dared to ask. As they drew near the hotel both, as a common impulse, slackened their pace.

"It is pleasanter out here than in that stuffy old inn, don't you think, Miss Montrose?" Eric said hesitatingly. "It occurred to me—but perhaps you're in a hurry. Now that everything's over you must naturally be anxious to get away as soon as possible."

"I can hardly say. I've no plans at present," she answered, with the abstract, absorbed look in her eyes which Eric knew by heart.

"Does that mean you'll stay in Winchester a little longer?"

"Oh, no. Unless anything happens I shall leave this evening for London. I've already sent a wire to Queen's Gate, where I was staying until—Mr. Gravdon," she broke off suddenly, "I want to ask you a question. Does the verdict of the jury imply that the thing is settled?"

"How do you mean, settled?"

"I thought, perhaps, the inquiry could not be re-opened not even if this suspected person were discovered."

"The coroner's inquiry was only for the purpose of ascertaining the cause of death. The police now have the matter in hand, and they will still continue to search for the assassin, and, if possible, bring him to justice."

The cathedral bell just then began ringing for the afternoon service. They had been about together a good deal. Eric had persuaded Alicia to walk as much as possible on the score of health, though it may be doubted whether he thought so much of her health as of the pleasure he felt in her society. More than once had they strolled to the quaint hospital of St. Cross; more than once had they wandered into the cathedral, and nothing so completely took their thoughts from the terrible mystery which had so strangely thrown them together as the stately, if somewhat cold and severe, music of the English church, devoid of ornament, passion, of all that is worldly

"If you've nothing better to do," said Eric, "I would suggest a half-hour in the cathedral; we shall probably never have another opportunity—it will be for the last time."

"For the last time," she repeated mechanically. "Yes."

So, instead of entering the inn, they turned back and went into the cathedral.

That half hour of solemn quietude was to Eric a spell of exquisite delight in a world holy, calm, peaceful. How much of this ideality was due to the presence and influence of the beautiful woman, the very touch of whose dress sent a thrill through his frame, he did not care to inquire.

The anthem was in keeping with his mood—one of those pure abstract creations of harmony which satisfy the senses without exciting them, and allow the mind to roam free and unfettered. He wanted nothing more than to listen dreamily to the music and gaze dreamily at Alicia Montrose.

As he listened his thoughts were dashed with gloom. Unsuggested by anything, the question darted into his mind—was not the mystery of the woman by his side the most inscrutable of all the mysteries which the tragedy suggested? He had only touched just the fringe of her story. He had never got beneath the barest surface of her character. What was the real woman under this icy reserve, this impassiveness and composure? He had never seen in her the slightest sign of emotion or tenderness, yet there was sometimes something about the corners of the mouth which seemed to indicate that she only maintained control of herself by a strong effort of the will.

Then there was the puzzle of the photograph. With every desire to favour her, he could not convince himself that her answers to the coroner's questions told all that she could tell. He thought of this and tried to read the riddle in her impassive face.

The music died away in soft prolonged modulations. The spell which had enthralled Eric Graydon was broken, to be succeeded by a pang which made his heart flutter strangely. Alicia had her handkerchief to her eyes. It was only for the briefest possible space of time, but Graydon saw that though her cheeks were dry her eyes were moist and shining, and the dark lashes had a lustre in them he had never seen before.

Somehow the sight encouraged him. He had a strange feeling of gladness, of exultation. The woman was not all ice after all. No, he fancied she was trembling, and he longed to clasp her in his arms and kiss those gleaming, tearful eyes.

The soft solemn cadence of the concluding responses were followed by the jubilant strains of a processional march, and the two filed out with the rest of the congregation into the long nave. Soon they found themselves alone, gazing at the vista ending in the brilliantly illuminated western window through which the afternoon sun was pouring a wealth of colour.

"I shall never forget our last afternoon together," said he softly. Then, after a pause, he added: "Would it be presumptuous in me to ask you to let me accompany you to London?"

He had no idea of making this request when he began to speak, but that yearning desire which had

overwhelmed him when he saw tears trembling on her eyelashes, returned with irresistible force. The thought that he should never see her again was unendurable.

"The world is as free to you as to me, Mr. Graydon," she answered, with a faint smile.

"Yes, yes; but can't you guess what's in my mind? Why should we say good-bye, just like mere formal acquaintances. Aren't we a little more than that?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. You've been a very good friend to me at a time of great stress and anguish. If I've appeared cold and ungrateful forgive me. I shall never forget your kindness. Thank you—thank you."

"That sounds like a dismissal. I'd rather you hadn't thanked me if it means a farewell."

"No, no; don't think that. Yet I'm certain it's better we should part—at least for the present," she quickly added, seeing the cloud on his face.

"Then I mayn't see you to London?"

"We had one railway journey together; it was too sad—too terrible. I brought you ill-luck then; I won't run the risk a second time."

"Risk!" cried Eric. "I'd dare any risk to be with you, and I don't agree with you about the ill-luck."

"Ah, you're not talking now with your usual good sense," she answered in a firm tone. "Come, let us go back to the hotel. My train's at seven, and I must pack first. You've no idea what that means to a woman," she added smilingly.

There was no mistaking her manner. It was certain she did not want his companionship, but

would not pain him by a direct refusal. He was too much of a gentleman to persist, and they passed silently out of the cathedral.

" Does your prohibition extend to my seeing you off by the train ? " said he, as they parted in the entrance lobby of the inn.

" Not at all. We'll have our leave-taking at the railway station."

She raised her long lashes and shot a glance from her grey eyes that went straight to his heart, wheeled round, and ascended the old-fashionep broad staircase with that grace and litheness he knew so well.

" You look a bit upset, sir," said John, the head waiter, who had taken Eric under his especial protection, confiding to him useful information about certain brands of wines and liqueurs, the existence of which only favoured guests were allowed to know. " A little drop of our 'Swan' cherry-brandy. Nothing like it for bucking one up."

" No, thank you, John. I'll have a long drink—brandy-and-soda."

His spirits were certainly somewhat dashed. He felt like a man who had had a prize within his grasp and had failed to hold it. Yet her last glance, was not that consolatory ? But even here he failed to find comfort.

" She wants to let me down easily. No, I'm an idiot to think any more about her."

She was quite an hour getting her belongings together, and when she re-appeared she looked more charming than ever in her travelling dress. They set out for the railway station, and Alicia was all cheerfulness. Her pensive mood had passed.

and Graydon tried to discover if her lightness of tone was real or assumed, but in vain. He dared not attempt to get back to that deeper note he had sounded in the cathedral. He well remembered how she instantly checked him, and he would not run the risk a second time.

They walked up and down the platform, and all at once she became silent. Her flow of talk had ceased, as though she were unable to maintain the effort. The sound of the approaching train was heard, and she put out her hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Graydon," said she, and he thought he could detect a tender tremulousness in her voice.

"I may call upon you in London, may I not?" he asked impulsively.

She hesitated; her eyebrows contracted slightly, and her eyes were cast down.

"If you care to do so."

The train was at the platform. He assisted her into a carriage and closed the door. She was smiling a farewell, when her glance seemed to pass him to some object or person beyond, and a look of unspeakable horror came into her eyes.

"Mr. Graydon," she gasped "please do not move away from the window until the train starts. I—I am frightened."

She sank back into the corner of the carriage with a shudder. Eric Graydon stood, sentinel like, wondering. The train moved. Swiftly she leant forward, and, to his amazement, clasped his hand convulsively, and he heard her whisper with nervous intensity

" Thank you, again and again. I shall never—never forget ! "

Then the train bore her rapidly away

Eric Graydon remained standing motionless for a few moments, stupefied. He turned, half expecting to find some cause for the woman's sudden terror, but all he could see were three men at the bookstall. It seemed to Graydon that behind Miss Montrose's entreaty was a fear lest she should be seen by somebody of whom she was afraid, and out of curiosity he strolled past the bookstall.

Two men out of the three struck him as worthy of his attention. The third was a jovial looking Hampshire farmer, and Graydon dismissed him at once. One of the others was tall, with a hard, lean, sunburnt face. His nose was acquiline, his jaw square and pronounced, his eyes bright, keen, almost hawk-like. He was about thirty, and ten years before would have been pronounced good-looking. His good looks had not disappeared, but they were marred by traces of dissipation. There was that curious suggestion of a grey shadow over his face which goes with years of wildness and self-indulgence. The second man was his contrast in every way. He was of middle height, fat and pasty faced ; his straight black hair was smooth and sleek, and his small twinkling eyes and loose lips suggested a mixture of cunning and complacency. He wore a soft felt trilby hat and carried an umbrella. Whether the two were together, Graydon could not say. They certainly did not talk to each other.

Graydon would have liked to settle this point, but he could not attract attention by standing still

and watching. He walked leisurely away, intending to return, but when he did so, the men were gone.

He went back to the inn, pondering over the cause of Alicia's sudden attack of nerves. Could it have been due to association of ideas? Why not? The train, the station where the old man was found murdered, might easily bring back a picture of that terrible night and suggest thoughts which would act on the nerves of a sensitive and excitable woman. Naturally, she was suffering from a reaction after a prolonged period of great anxiety. That clasp of the hand—might it not be explained by the uncontrollable impulse of a frightened woman to cling to one who she believed was stronger than herself? So, Eric Graydon went back to the hotel disturbed, almost angry.

"Why didn't I insist upon going to London with her? I believe she would have liked me to, but, of course, she wouldn't say so."

But perhaps he was right not to go. He could scarcely have forced his company upon her in the same carriage, and to have travelled in another would have seemed strange. For all that he was annoyed with himself for his want of decision and masterfulness. He was not usually diffident and irresolute where ladies were concerned, but Alicia Montrose was quite different from the women he was accustomed to meet—and romance has a way of changing one's nature.

He entered the house and called for his bill. The landlord brought it personally. It was the last honour he could pay to a customer who had spent so much money in the house.

"I hope everything has been satisfactory, Mr. Graydon?" said he, rubbing his hands.

"Oh, yes, I've been very comfortable. The only thing I regret is the business which forced me to come here."

"I don't wonder at that, sir. Strange as the police can't get upon the track of the murderous scoundrel. And the poor young lady. It must have been awful bad for her, but she kept up wonderfully—wonderfully. By the way, sir, you hadn't been gone five minutes when a man came into the car, called for a drink, and began asking all kinds of questions about you and Miss Montrose."

"What did he want to know?"

"Things that didn't concern him—a stranger. I told him so pretty sharp."

The landlord seemed to be rather reluctant on the point, and Graydon pressed him.

"Well, sir ——" said the landlord, with an apologetic cough. "So far as I could make out he was very curious to find out whether you and the young lady were sweetheartin' together—begging your pardon for putting it that way."

"Confound his impudence!" exclaimed Graydon wrathfully.

"Oh, he didn't get anything out of me, sir. Not at all, sir. Oh dear no, sir. He didn't stay long, finding, I s'pose, as he'd come to the wrong shop for information. I thought p'raps he might be a 'tec, so I shut him up by referring him to the police."

"That's right. What sort of man was he?"

"Looked as if he'd just come from abroad. A bit swanky and bouncible—talked as if all the world

belonged to him. I've seen lots of his sort on the racecourse, and I daresay you have too, sir."

Graydon knew the men the landlord referred to. They are generally called "the boys," otherwise gentry who will take on any kind of rascality, provided they are paid for it. He could not help thinking that the landlord's description, meagre as it was, suggested a reminiscence of the tall man he saw at the bookstall, and he tried to get a few more details. The landlord, however, had not taken very much notice of the fellow, and he was not good at drawing word pictures. Graydon's curiosity remained unsatisfied, and he dismissed the matter from his mind.

But he could not get rid of his anxiety concerning Alicia, and again he reproached himself for his lack of initiative in not insisting upon accompanying her to London. What was to be his next step? He felt as though he were stranded. The house-party to which he was on his way when the unexpected happened and Alicia Montrose came into his life, had long since broken up. Moreover, he was in no mood to be pestered with questions by his friends. All he could do was to return to town. He owed a visit to his father, who had written him more than one letter not altogether in a nice tone. Sir George had been laid up with gout, and this, no doubt, was answerable for his querulousness. But his father just now was of no importance. The foremost thought in his mind was eagerness to make up for his stupidity in taking Alicia at her word. Why not call at Queen's Gate? The very suggestion took a load off his mind. A call would not look obtrusive—he was not in the mood to care if it did—it was only natural that he should like to

know if she had arrived safely ; especially after her strange terror. So he had his luggage sent to the station, and started by the next train, having wired to his man to meet him at Waterloo.

He reached London about nine, and found Davis in readiness. He sent the man on with the luggage and he was about to get into a taxi when he caught sight of the fat pasty-faced man whom he had seen at the bookstall at Winchester. For an instant he wavered. His impulse was to follow this man, and this impulse he might have obeyed had not the chauffeur intervened with his " Where to, sir ? "

Gravdon involuntarily turned his head, but made no answer, and when he again looked where he had seen the pasty-faced man, the latter had disappeared. The chance was gone.

CHAPTER VI

THE "CARPETTING" OF ERIC GRAYDON

"MISS MONTROSE?" said the sedate man-servant at Talbot House, Queen's Gate, the next day. "I don't think a lady of that name's staying here, but I'll enquire."

He went away with Graydon's card, and in his place appeared Mrs. Carleton, the proprietress, a stout, good-looking, well-dressed lady with a good-humoured face, a decided manner and a voluble tongue.

"I quite expected Miss Montrose here last night," she began at once. "I had a telegram from her, dated Winchester, yesterday afternoon, telling me she was coming. Then about three hours later came another, sent from Waterloo, saying she had altered her arrangements, and wouldn't be here. Excuse me, but are you the Mr. Eric Graydon who gave evidence at the inquest?"

"Certainly."

"Dear me. It was a very unpleasant experience for you—indeed, it's been most unpleasant for everybody. I had a visit from a detective and he quite frightened me. It's a great pity Miss Montrose was not more explicit. I can't imagine what she had to conceal. It almost made one suspect she knew more about the murder than she cared to say. What is your opinion, Mr. Graydon?"

"I've no opinion on the subject," said Graydon freezingly. "I understood Miss Montrose was coming back to stay at your house, and as I happened to be in town, I thought it would be only polite to call, but as she isn't here, no doubt she's altered her mind. After all, it's only natural she should avoid being questioned and talked over, as she doubtless would be in a boarding-house."

"My establishment is not exactly a boarding-house—that is, it's not an ordinary boarding-house like a good many of those places in Bloomsbury or Bayswater," rejoined the lady tartly. "My connection is not a chance one, here to-day and gone to-morrow, and, perhaps, leaving in debt. All of my paying guests come by recommendation. Poor Mr. Haggar, for instance. He was introduced by a city gentleman, who has had a room here for some years. Miss Montrose came as Mr. Haggar's ward—of course, I only had his word for it, and, as Miss Montrose told the same story at the inquest, I suppose it's true, but really so many queer things are done now-a days that one doesn't know what to believe."

"Have you any doubt, then, of Miss Montrose having spoken the truth?" asked Graydon, with rising anger.

"Oh dear me, no. I've to listen to what's said and hold my tongue. Of course I needn't say, as both Mr. Haggar and Miss Montrose stayed at Talbot House, there was a good deal of gossip, especially as Mr. Haggar was known to be very rich and as there was such a contrast between him and Miss Montrose, both in their looks and in years. You can't prevent people talking, you know. The

exact relationship between them was always a mystery, because the poor old gentleman kept himself very much to himself, and Miss Montrose was almost as reserved, but, of course, everything was explained at the inquest. It was a pity Miss Montrose didn't take me into her confidence. I should certainly have advised her to marry Mr. Haggar. Five years was all the doctor gave him he was always ailing while he was here and his widow would have been an enormously rich woman and could have married anyone she liked. I think she was very foolish. Of course, I only looked at the matter from a common-sense point of view, and I've always found common-sense to be the best in the long run

"Oh, no doubt—no doubt," put in Graydon, when he had a chance to speak. "Do you think there's any possibility of Miss Montrose coming to stay with you again?"

"Really, I haven't the slightest idea. There are her two telegrams—you can read them for yourself. I can't tell you any more than what they say."

And the messages said nothing. They were simply formal intimations of a request and a countermand. Graydon handed them back to Mrs Carleton without a word

"If Miss Montrose should come after all shall I tell her you called, Mr. Graydon?

"Yes—if you would be so good"

"Can I give her any message?"

"No. Perhaps I may write. Good-night

Eric strode away abruptly, certain that Mrs

Carleton could tell him nothing he did not know. Moreover, her "common-sense" rather jarred upon him.

"Common-sense with some people means pounds, shillings and pence, and looking after Number One," he muttered. "That isn't my way and I'm certain it isn't Alicia's."

Then his thoughts turned to the all-important questions: What had happened to make Alicia change her mind? Where had she [illegible]?

A week passed. He called twice at Talbot House, but could learn nothing. Mrs. Carleton had not heard from Miss Montrose. Graydon was reluctant to show the anxiety he felt, and equally reluctant to appear curious, so he contented himself with [illegible] Mrs. Carleton a solitary question: Did she know if Miss Montrose had any friends with whom [illegible] likely to stay?

"Mr. Graydon," said the lady, in her most impressive manner. "I've had a considerable experience of people since I began receiving paying guests and I assure you I never met a young lady [illegible] reserved concerning herself and her affairs as Miss Alicia Montrose. When she left with Mr. Haggar we knew no more about her than when [illegible] first in the house. Mr. Haggar paid all the bills, and that puzzled me until I read what she told the coroner. To tell you the truth, we were inclined to put her down as an adventuress. You've no idea how many women of that kind are to be found in boarding-houses and first-class hotels. I [illegible] say Miss Montrose was different from the [illegible] of these persons. They always let them [illegible] to please everybody, and I never [illegible]

Miss Montrose eager to do that. It was the other way about. She wasn't much liked."

Graydon went away more despondent than before. The solitary hope he had was that she might write to him, for he had given her his address in Jermyn Street. But was it likely? Why should she want to see him? Indeed, sometimes in his self-tormentings, he thought she was anxious to say farewell, as though she had divined his growing passion, and did not wish to encourage it.

He walked back to his rooms, and the discreet Davis, who had long since arrived at the conclusion that his "chief" was off colour, hovered about him and anticipating his wants, put a box of cigarettes on the smoking-table at his elbow.

"These are the small Alturas, sir, that you haven't tried yet," said the servitor.

"Take them away and don't bother me," returned his master irritably.

"Yes, sir."

"And for heaven's sake don't wander about like a ghost. You'll drive me mad. What do you do it for?"

"Yes, sir. I thought perhaps you'd like me to get you something—a little curaçoa or Chartreuse or——"

"I don't want anything. Get away."

Davis was gliding across the room when his master's voice arrested him.

"Come back! Don't be in such a confounded hurry! Who's called since I've been away?"

"Nobody in particular, sir. A gentleman from one of the newspapers wanted to see you, but I said you'd given me strict orders that you didn't

want to see any gentleman of the press. I had great trouble in getting rid of him. He wanted to wait till you came back, but I told him it was no good. He was most puttynacious, sir."

"Oh, I know. They're all like that. They believe you *must* know a lot if you could only be got to speak. Did the man say what he wanted?"

"Yes, sir; his paper's very anxious to get hold of the photograph that was found in the railway carriage. He says that if it were published it might lead to the discovery of the photographer and so help the police to track the murderer. I believe, sir," went on Davis hesitatingly, "that the photograph was a very singular one. The man who took it couldn't help recollecting it. Of course, sir, I know nothing beyond what I've read in the papers, sir."

"Well, let the man go to the police. They've got it. I haven't," said Gravdon savagely. "The papers ought to be contented with what they've got. Didn't they send their infernal snapshotters to Winchester and pursue the poor girl and myself all over the place? If any more come say you know nothing, and it's no use bothering me for information."

Eric underrated the pertinacity and the power of the press. Opening his newspaper at breakfast the next morning, he saw the photograph of the enigmatical eyes. Naturally they had lost considerably by the transference to a block, by coarse paper and rapid printing, but they were unmistakable. But this was not all. There was also a snapshot of Alicia and himself, caught as they were coming out of the "Swan Hotel." Alicia appeared to be

smiling inanely, and Eric's left leg was drawn up at the knee as though he were about to plunge into a ragtime. As for his face, thanks to the shadow of his hat, it was eclipsed.

He flung the paper on the ground, and Davis picked it up with a grin.

" What do you think of it, Davis ? "

" Not a bit like you, sir. I never saw you drag your leg after you in that fashion, sir. It's just as if you'd got locomotive taxi, what my poor father died of."

Gravdon wondered if Alicia had seen the snapshots and what she thought of them. He lingered over his breakfast, lit a cigarette and wandered aimlessly about the room. He was disgusted with himself and the more so because he could not make up his mind what to do.

" I'm not going to lose her. I feel I *can't,*" he muttered desperately.

He strode to the window and gazed into the drabness of Jermyn Street, but not with any particular object.

" Davis," he suddenly called out. " Come here."

" Yes, sir."

" Do you see that podgy, flat-footed fellow in the seedy black suit ? "

" Yes, sir."

" Ever seen him before ? "

" No, sir."

It was certainly the pasty-faced man he had seen at the bookstall and at Waterloo. If it were simply an accident that this shabby individual should be in Jermyn Street, strolling slowly past the

house as though waiting for somebody, the coincidence was, to say the least, remarkable.

"Davis," he exclaimed. "My boots and coat."

He was in his slippers and smoking jacket. He kicked away the first and pulled off the second. It had occurred to him to do a little amateur shadowing and chance what it led to. The pasty-faced man took two or three turns and then disappeared into a street leading to Piccadilly. Now was the time for Eric to commence his shadowing, and he hastened down the staircase into the street. He crossed to the turning down which the man had disappeared, but nothing could be seen of him.

"Look here, Davis," said he on his return, "just keep an eye on the street in case that fellow comes back. I want to find out if he's watching this house."

"Yes, sir. While you were away this letter came. Club porter brought it."

Eric Graydon made a grimace. He recognised his father's scrawling hand.

"My dear boy," wrote Sir George. "Come to lunch here, one o'clock sharp. I want to talk to you. Have come to town on purpose, in spite of the gout."

"Humph. That means the talk's not going to be particularly pleasant. I suppose I must go and get it over. Deuce take that snapshot."

The request was one he could not disregard. His replies to the letters he had received from his father while at Winchester had been brief and somewhat evasive, and it was on his conscience that he ought to have paid him a duty call. Winchester was within fairly easy reach of Guildford,

and he could have easily have gone to Holmhurst, but he did not want to lose sight of Alicia, and he was afraid that were he once within sight and sound of his father he might find some difficulty in inventing a sufficiently plausible reason for not staying a day or two with him.

He knew his father's hatred of unpunctuality, and he entered the vestibule of the Metropolitan Club at five minutes to one precisely. Sir George was in the dining room, an apartment too big and too grand for comfort. Eric had no occasion to enquire where his father was sitting. When he lunched or dined at the club, Sir George always had one particular table which the waiter took care to reserve for him.

"Thought you'd forgotten there was such a person in the world as—h'm—h'm—your father," said Sir George grumpily, and he extended his left hand. He always showed his displeasure by his scant courtesy.

Sir George Graydon was one of a type of city man of whom one can see dozens any day in the neighbourhood of the Stock Exchange. They are all red-faced, well fed, heavy jowled, double-chinned, beefy men, with codfish eyes and protuberant waistcoats. They generally have heavy moustaches the curve of which meets the crease in the double chin and completes a circle. They are mostly scant of breath, especially when excited. The Sir Georges of the city are essentially a product of the last five and thirty years, and always suggest money, good living, vanity and selfishness. Sir George had made a big fortune in rubber and oils, but in what way he came to be a knight is a secret

best known to himself and the political party to which he belonged.

"How's the gout, sir?" said Eric, dropping into the chair facing his father.

"For goodness sake, Eric, don't remind me of that damned gout. I was in the city for half-an-hour this morning and I did little else but answer that dashed silly question absolutely; and now you come and—and the first thing you ask is—is——What do you say, Joseph?"

Joseph the waiter was cooing mellifluously into Sir George's ear.

"Will I have Madeira with my soup? Well, it's about the worst thing I can take according to those detestable doctors. Their idea of curing me is to cut off everything that makes life endurable. Yes, Madeira, and I'll take the chance of what happens."

Sir George's speculation as to the effect of Madeira was quite superfluous. He knew well enough what would happen, and so did those around him. Eric saw that his father was working himself up to the "talk" and he prepared for the worst. Sir George, however, rarely let anything affect his appetite, and the soup, and the fish, and the cutlet disappeared before he opened fire.

"How about that awkward affair you've mixed yourself up in? I see the inquest is over, but what about yourself and the woman? Is that over too?"

"Is what over, sir?"

"Now, don't repeat my question, Eric. You know perfectly well what I mean. To judge by that photograph I saw in the papers this morning, you seem to be jolly friendly with her. It gave me the

cold shivers when I saw the thing, absolutely. Every man I met in the city wanted to know all about it, and what the deuce could I say? What I mean is that it was confoundedly stupid of you to go beaning her about publicly?"

"I don't see the stupidity. Of course, I admit the snapshot was very annoying, but I wasn't responsible for that."

"Pray don't quibble. If you hadn't been with the woman, the photo couldn't have been taken, could it? You know very well what's in my mind about your future career. I've taken a lot of trouble about it with the party organisers, and they've picked out an easy seat. What I mean is, a gentlemanly fellow like you oughtn't to have the slightest difficulty in making friends, and all you've got to do is to nurse the constituency till the next election. But I tell you straight you won't have the ghost of a chance if you're connected in any way with a scandal."

"That remark's a little superfluous, isn't it?"

"Not at all. Your opponent's a vulgar, coarse fellow—'one of the people'—he calls himself—he's fought two or three elections and he knows the value of throwing mud. You may lay your life this affair won't be forgotten. Who knows? You may see that photograph of yourself and Miss What's-her-name enlarged and used as a poster."

"That's nonsense father," rejoined Eric considerably nettled.

"So it may be. It's true for all that. And it's not the only trouble likely to come out of the thing. I hope you haven't forgotten what I told you about Hargrave and his daughter. Hargrave's the richest

man in Slumpington, and his support has great weight with the electors. It's up to you to win the seat and Millicent Hargrave as well—at least it *was* up to you. How the matter stands at the present moment the deuce only knows. Anyway you must at once set about putting things right. Hargrave and his daughter are both in town now. You'd better call this afternoon and explain things."

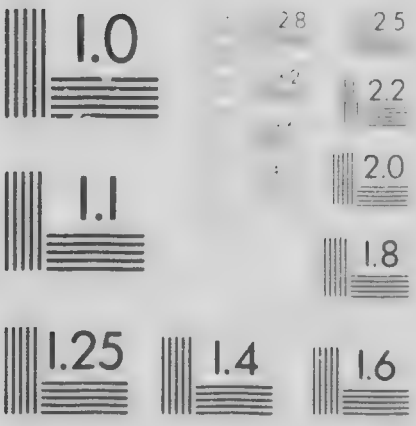
"Hang it, sir, but I've nothing to explain. The French have a proverb—'*qui s'excuse s'accuse*'—and it fits the case."

"So it may. I know nothing about French and I don't want to. The point that strikes me as a plain man is what people will think about you. It doesn't matter a row of beans what the truth may be, they're bound to put two and two together. Do you suppose anyone believes the woman's story about old David Haggar wanting to marry her? Why on earth should he? I sat next him about three months ago at a city company's dinner, and a harder-headed old chap I never met. Liked a good story, and told a few himself. A queer lot out in Jamaica—free and easy and all that sort of thing. Don't worry themselves about the seventh commandment—you know what I mean. If Haggar *did* propose, do you suppose any girl in her senses would refuse him? You may take my word for it, she's an adventuress, absolutely."

"That's untrue, I am sure. You're horribly unjust, sir," burst out Eric.

"Oh, I only take a business-like common-sense view of things. What I mean to say is, if you can convince me I'm wrong so much the better. What do you know about her?"

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART



"Nothing but what she told the coroner and what Haggar's solicitor said."

Sir George's flinty blue eyes were fixed on his son. The latter's reply in a sense gave him satisfaction. If Eric were to be believed he could not be on a very confidential footing with Miss Montrose, or he would have discovered a little more than what was disclosed at the inquest.

"Where's the young woman now?"

"Haven't the least idea. We said good-bye at Winchester."

"Then you've done with her?"

"I suppose so."

"Why the deuce didn't you tell me that before?" rejoined Sir George picking up. "It would have saved all this talk. At the same time you'd better call on the Hargraves."

"For the sake of the seat or the daughter?"

"For the sake of both. Of course, I don't want you to marry any particular woman to please me ---"

"Thank you," interjected Eric, with a fervency which was decidedly ironic.

"Eh? Well, what I mean to say is, follow your own fancy, but for heaven's sake don't forget the essentials—money and position. Get both if you can, if not you must put up with one. Hargrave's got the first, and if his influence runs you in at Slumpington, he'll give you the second, absolutely."

"And what do I give in return for all these privileges?"

"What do *you* give? Bless my soul, can't you see? What did I send you to Oxford for? Cost me a tidy sum, I can tell you—what I mean to say

is that I looked upon it as a good investment and I chose Oxford because I always say that the best's the cheapest in the long run. Cambridge is all very well, but it hasn't the tone of Oxford. What you want now-a-days is to rub shoulders against the right people, and at Oxford you were lucky enough to get into a first-class set. I know it. I've looked up the names of your swell friends and I found you'd done just what I wanted, absolutely. Why if I was a company promoter you'd be of no end of use to me. What I mean to say is you could get me any number of ornamental directors. But thank God I've no necessity for that sort of thing. I've made my pile and all I want, my boy, is to see you make a figure in the world."

Sir George stuck his hands deep in his trousers pocket and rattled his money complacently. Eric did not share his father's jubilation. He sat smoking gloomily and made no response.

"Now we'll waste no more time. Nothing like promptitude in business. Go to Portland Place this afternoon, do the amiable to the girl—what I mean to say is I don't insist upon your making love or any of that tommy rot—and have a talk with Hargrave about opening the campaign at Slumpington. He ain't had much education—I don't boast about mine, I had to pick it up as I went along in the world—but I think I could give him points in the three Hars and beat him—but he's as sharp as a needle. Just flatter him a bit, and he'll be all right. Mind you, he knows the ropes, so you may take what he says, absolutely as the right thing.

I suppose it'll be necessary for me to settle my political opinions?"

"Settle? What have you got to settle? There's only one sort of politics for men of sense, what I mean is, those with a stake in the country. Don't you worry about politics. Your game is to make yourself agreeable—join every blessed society and club—football, cricket, Odd Fellows, Buffaloes, charitable, social—subscribe to all the blooming lot. And don't forget the church. The church is always a safe thing. But Hargrave'll put you in the way. I'm not sure whether it wouldn't be well if you lived at Slumpington for a time. Football's coming on, and it would look well in the papers to read 'Kick-off by the brilliant young candidate' or something of that sort. You'd better lose no time in getting to work," added Sir George, looking at his watch. "I've an appointment with my stockbroker at three. I shall be seeing Hargrave in two or three days and shall be anxious to know from him what he thinks of your prospects. But don't forget the girl—what I mean to say is she's the trump card. By jove, women nowadays command the situation."

"And that's about the only thing you've said, my dear father, I agree with," thought Eric, as he left the dining-room. "It wasn't quite so obvious, though, two months ago as it is now."

CHAPTER VII

GRAYDON'S THEORY OF THE TRAGEDY

A WEEK passed. Eric Graydon never went near Portland Place and never gave a thought to the electors of Slumpington. The only effect of his father's suggestions was to make him more resolved in his determination to find Alicia. In their talks at Winchester they had discussed many subjects of which, until he met her, he had taken little heed. The ideas of the "first-class set" at Oxford were practically no ideas at all. Their narrow world of sport and pleasure was the only one worth thinking about, and all outside that world was of no account. Of course the "masses" had to work very hard, but really work was the best thing for them, and it would be much nicer for them and everybody else if they would not be so wasteful and extravagant and discontented. The "first-class set" looked upon capital as something standing quite by itself and existing simply for the sake of giving work to the "masses" and it was most stupid and ungrateful of the "working-classes" not to see that it was their best friend. What would the workingman do without capital? the "first-class set" asked triumphantly. Beyond this it was not necessary to go

Eric had somehow imbibed the notion that the best rule of life was to avoid everything that was

unpleasant. The policy of the ostrich saved a lot of trouble. His father had always wished him to live the life of a "gentleman," meaning by this that he was to dress well, dance well, shoot well, mix only with the "best people," and keep any folly he might be tempted to commit out of sight. Of course, he might sow a few wild oats—the world, that is, the fashionable world, would think no less of him for that—but all must be "gentlemanly." Eric Graydon had always had a liberal income, not one penny of which he had earned, and he accepted the situation without much thought. It had never occurred to him that if suddenly stranded—in spite of the honours he had taken at Oxford, and in spite of his rowing third in a winning eight—he would hardly know how to earn his living. He might enlist, but he would hardly be taken on as a labourer.

He had not given much thought to these things before meeting Alicia Montrose under such strange and tragic circumstances. The grim story had forced him to regard life in a new light. In his talks with her he had discovered that Alicia had notions of independence which were quite fresh to him. One conversation had clung to his memory.

"I hate to be under an obligation to anybody. I hate to be told I must do this or the other thing. I want to go my own way. But the trouble is that one's actions are so dependant upon other people. Don't you think so?" she had asked him.

"It never occurred to me—until lately, perhaps. I've always done pretty much as I liked, since I left Oxford. My father rarely troubles me."

"Is he contented to give you an allowance to

keep you in idleness? Excuse my putting it in that way."

"Oh, you're quite right. Apparently it is so."

"And you've no responsibilities of any kind?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"That doesn't seem to be a very satisfying kind of life. I couldn't exist without work of some kind."

"Oh, well, I get horribly bored sometimes. And what work do you prefer?"

"Ah, you want to know too much," said she lightly.

The conversation passed to other matters, and she left his curiosity unsatisfied.

Before the week was over, his father wrote a snappish letter expressing surprise that Eric had not kept his promise to call on Hargrave.

"Hargrave may go to the deuce, and Slumpington too," muttered Graydon. "If ever I do get into Parliament, about which in my present mind I don't care a hang, it shan't be through 'nursing' a constituency. I've other things to think of just now. The country must get on without my efforts to help govern it."

He turned the letter over and caught sight of a postcript. "Get the *Society Scorpion*, and see the correspondence that's started about the woman with the eyes. The letter confirms my opinion absolutely. There's no doubt she's an adventuress."

It angered him that his father should be so eager to seize upon anything that told against Alicia, and at first he resolved to take no heed of the suggestion to get the *Scorpion*. But, on thinking over the matter, he decided that, however disagreeable

the reading might be, he ought to know what was said, if only to be prepared to defend her if necessary.

He sent Davis for a copy. The man was some time gone, and meanwhile Graydon impatiently paced his room.

"Had to go to several shops, sir," said Davis "There's been quite a run on the paper."

Eric ground his teeth as he read. Under the pretence of acting in "the public interest," the writer attacked the "supineness" of the police in not following up "a very definite clue." Then came what was called "an impartial review of the facts," and under cover of this, a theory was evolved which made "the woman with the eyes" the central figure. The writer admitted that his arguments were hypothetical, but when one was "reconstructing the case"—after the fashion of criminal procedure in France hypothesis had at first to be depended upon. The letter was obviously intended as a peg upon which to found a controversy, and was all the more outrageous on that account.

Some hours went over before Graydon cooled down. He was at first tempted to write a strong letter to the editor, protesting against statements being made which were wholly without foundation, but on reflection it occurred to him that this was playing into the enemy's hands.

"I know what *that* would lead to. Posters all over London with 'Important letter from Mr. Eric Graydon' on it. What would the pater say then? It's beastly, but I must leave the thing alone. I can do no good at present."

Another week went by, and in the meantime he

hoped that Alicia would write to him, but she was silent and the hope died away. Another number of the *Scorpion* appeared, and it was clear that the controversy was in full swing. Much was made of the photograph found in the railway carriage, it was once more reproduced, and the writer of one letter was very vehement on the "reticence" shown by Miss Montrose. "If she is really anxious for the elucidation of the mystery," the writer declared, "she ought to have told the coroner the circumstances under which so unusual a photograph was taken, at what date, and when it was she gave it to Mr. Haggar."

The matter worried Graydon intensely, and sometimes he dreaded to open the morning's paper lest he should light upon something that was disquieting. But all he saw was the stereotyped statement that the police were still inquiring into the "Winchester Railway Tragedy." Apparently they were completely baffled. Nor had the shabby man with the pasty face been seen again in Jermyn Street—so Davis reported, but it was by no means certain whether Davis was to be depended upon. At all events one night when going out Graydon felt sure he saw the fellow in the distance.

The worry was getting on his nerves, so to get a change he went for two or three nights the round of his old haunts. But their gaiety and glitter failed to interest him. The men were boisterous and "swanky," the women were inane or vulgar. He looked into a well-known music hall where, at one time, he had found amusement. He came out thinking variety-show artists had terribly deteriorated.

Even music, of which he was exceedingly fond had lost its delights. The music of the halls at any rate sounded blatant, harsh, discordant. He found himself recalling the calm sweet strains which had so enchanted him in Winchester Cathedral. But it was not alone the music which dwelt in his memory. As vivid as ever was the face of Alicia Montrose, as he had then seen it with the dark lashes wet with tears—tears that had he dared he would have kissed away.

Disillusioned and dispirited he made his way through Leicester Square to Coventry Street. It was the hour when the theatres and the halls were pouring forth their crowds, and the pavement was thronged with a jostling mulititude—well-dressed, ill-dressed men; city men "making a night of it"; men with "sport" written all over them; men of the "respectable" type hurrying to their suburban homes; Soho loafers, more or less disreputable looking and mysterious; ragged vagabonds and riff-raff generally.

Bold, reckless, handsome—a few of them—women, some with their faces thick with paint, flaunted by, with a pronounced rustle of their skirts. Now and again one found oneself in the midst of a babel of foreign tongues, harsh, shrill, guttural, with bursts of strident, mirthless laughter. Flower girls pushed their wares in the faces of the men, especially of those who had ladies with them; old beggar women whined for pence.

The whole suggested a spasm of hurry, of excitement, of feverish life—a life which once had had its fascination for Eric Graydon, but which was now utterly distasteful.

"Hallo Graydon, old man," cried a voice in his ear. "Glad to see you back in town after your romantic adventures. Come into the Café Universal. I want to have a talk with you."

The speaker was Teddy St. Maur, an old college chum. Graydon was not sorry to see him. He was just in the mood to pour his troubles into some friendly ear. They pushed their way through the crowd of men and women thronging the vestibule, and sat down at one of the tables. The air was terribly hot and close, and highly charged with tobacco smoke. St. Maur ordered whiskeys and sodas.

"You've been having rather a busy time lately, haven't you?" said St. Maur. "I know nothing beyond what I've read in the papers, of course, but it was sufficient to make me envy you. Anyhow it's odd we should meet, because I had the privilege this very day of seeing the lady of the tragedy, and now that I've seen her I envy you more than ever."

"*You* saw Miss Montrose?" exclaimed Graydon excitedly. "My dear chap, tell me all about it don't speak too loud. We don't know who may be listening."

"All right. It came about by accident, as most things in this world do. This morning I was in the office of Perry and Latimer—they've been good enough to give me a brief or two—I believe it's not etiquette for a barrister to call on a solicitor; however, I did it. Perry knew me when I was a boy. I was in his outer office, when one of the most graceful women I ever saw in my life came sailing out of Perry's private room. She was in

mourning, and wore a thick veil so that I could not see her face; but if it corresponded to her figure she must be gloriously handsome. Perry told me who she was—Miss Montrose, who figured so prominently in the Winchester murder case."

"And what did Perry say about her?" enquired Graydon eagerly.

"Well, as a rule, lawyers don't talk about their clients' affairs, but Perry and I are very old friends, and he let out one or two things—of course on the strict Q.T. It seems old Haggar died worth a million, but without making a will——"

"There's no necessity for secrecy so far," broke in Graydon hastily. "Perry said as much as that at the inquest. He gave evidence, you know. I must have been frightfully muddleheaded not to think of Perry and Latimer. They were the old man's solicitors. I ought to have gone to them. I beg your pardon, Teddy, for interrupting. You don't know what I'm talking about."

"That's of no consequence so long as *you* know. As you say, the fact of there being no will is no secret, but it seems that Mr. Haggar meant to make one. He consulted Perry and Latimer about his intentions, but nothing was set down on paper. Roundly speaking, he meant to leave all his fortune to Miss Montrose, whether she married him or not. Perry was surprised, after the conversation he had with Mr. Haggar, that the old man started to return to Jamaica without carrying out his intention. No will has been found anyhow. Haggar, it seems, had no house of his own in England, but moved about from hotel to boarding-house and back again, so he could hardly have any hiding places."

"About the secrecy you talked of just now where does it come in?" asked Graydon.

"Simply that Miss Montrose doesn't want it known where she's living. Of course, it's natural enough, seeing the notoriety she earned. You've seen the disagreeable letters the *Scorpion's* been publishing, of course?"

"Yes. They're disgraceful and libellous."

"If they're libellous, the girl has her remedy. She can proceed against the paper, but she's silent."

"Why, of course," flashed out Graydon indignantly. "She'd only lower herself by taking notice of the gadflies."

"H m," said St. Maur musingly. "You think that, do you?"

"Think? I'm sure of it."

"Well, I suppose you've a right to be positive, seeing that you ought to know the lady better than anyone else. But from an outsider's point of view, there's much ground for argument that she knows more about the murder than she cares to say."

"That's a monstrous assertion," cried Graydon hotly.

St. Maur looked steadily at his friend and noted the angry glare in his eyes and his quivering nostrils.

"My dear old chap, don't get excited over a mere opinion. Everybody has a right to his opinion, you know."

"Of course—of course. I beg your pardon," said Graydon. "I only say that if you'd once met Miss Montrose, if you'd seen her gloriously handsome face—you told me I think that she was closely veiled this morning—if you'd once heard the music

of her voice and had come under the magic of her eyes, you'd——"

"Be in love with her as you evidently are, old chap."

"In love with her?" repeated Graydon desperately. "Well, perhaps I am. What then?"

"I don't know excepting that if it was my case I'd keep a tight rein over myself. It's so easy to be an ass where a woman's concerned."

"And it's equally easy to be an ass where she's not. Of the two I'd rather be one of the first kind."

"Does she know that you're gone on her?"

"My dear chap, is there a man living who can answer such a question? I mean in the first stages of love? Women never give themselves away. How can one tell?"

"A man may never utter a syllable on the subject yet a woman knows all the same. As for Miss Montrose and her magical eyes they must have been very remarkable or they wouldn't have been photographed——"

"There's been far too much made of that confounded photograph."

"Never mind. On your own evidence the lady's eyes are magical, and we'll leave it at that. The idea that occurred to me while we were talking of love puzzles is that possibly it is on your account she desires to be left in retirement and imposes secrecy on her solicitors. I don't mean to be uncomplimentary, but supposing you're not acceptable to her and that she's afraid you might follow her up?"

Graydon made no reply. The same thought had entered his mind, but he had crushed it. He was

determined not to relinquish the pursuit until he was thoroughly satisfied there was no hope for him.

"There's another way of looking at the thing—what I may call the complimentary way. Put it that she's taken kindly to you, but that she *does* know something and doesn't want to entangle you further in a very awkward business. That would be enough to make her keep herself dark, wouldn't it?"

"I don't know what to think," said Graydon vaguely.

If he had any thought at all it was that as a detective he would hardly prove a success or it would have occurred to him long before to go to Perry and Latimer for information concerning Alicia.

The two friends smoked silently for a couple of minutes. The leader of the orchestra, a superb violinist, had commenced a solo, which he played with all the passionate fervour of the musician who is a born artist. The tenderness of the melody and the intensity of feeling shown by the executant, had a soothing effect on Graydon, who had found himself becoming unreasonably irritable, although he was quite conscious the fault was his and not St. Maur's.

"Eric, old chap," said the latter, when the applause following the solo had died away. "I don't want to touch upon any controversial matter, because it's quite clear that you're personally interested in this terrible business, and I might unintentionally tread on your toes, but do you mind telling me—you, who have made up your mind on the matter—what your theory of the tragedy is. Design or accident?"

"Accident most certainly," exclaimed Graydon with emphasis. "Do you know that there's not a murder in a train which can be said to have been premeditated? Take the first case on record—in England, anyhow. Did Muller set out with the intention of doing Mr. Briggs to death? Not a bit of it. He didn't know Briggs from Adam. He simply saw a well-to-do old gentleman dozing in a first-class compartment and—he wanted money. Did Lefroy expect to meet Mr. Gold when he set out in the morning to get money somehow? The whole thing was purely chance. Was there any reason why the assassin of poor Miss Camp should have selected her for his victim save that she happened to be travelling alone? Was there any evidence of premeditation in the Merstham tunnel mystery? Not a particle. Robbery wasn't the motive in the last case, but it was so in all the others."

"I admit the force of your examples, but what of the present instance?"

"In the present instance the fellow in the compartment next to that in which Mr. Haggar was travelling, was out for robbery if it came in his way, but not necessarily a robbery in the train, much less a murder. He was in his compartment before Mr. Haggar entered the train, and he couldn't possibly have anticipated who would be his neighbour. How could he tell that Mr. Haggar was going to travel alone when Miss Montrose accompanied the poor man to the very door of the carriage? How was he to know that Miss Montrose would leave him? No, the whole business was purely chance."

"You've made up your mind then that the man

in the next compartment was the assassin?"

"It could be no other. He saw this feeble old man crawling across the platform; he could tell by Miss Montrose's dress that they were people of means, and no doubt he caught sight of Mr. Haggar's valuable ruby glowing in his black satin scarf. Everything was in his favour. He had his revolver with him, he knew the rattle of the rain and the noise of the wind, added to the roar of the train, would drown the report, and he was tempted. Undoubtedly he escaped when the train was signalled to stop. He threw his ulster and cap in the canal, because he feared they would betray him. Of course, this fellow was the assassin, and it's a marvel the police haven't tracked him down."

"And the photograph of the girl's eyes—what's your theory about that?"

"I've no theory. How can I have when there's nothing to go upon? We're bound to accept her explanation. Why shouldn't we? Meanwhile I've had enough of this heat and smoke. Let's clear out."

They threaded their way through the labyrinth of tables, indifferent to the battery of eyes turned upon them by loudly-dressed, unattached ladies, and reached the lobby, unconscious that they were being watched by two men sitting at a table in the corner of the room. These two exchanged glances.

"We haven't got much forrader, Bert," said the fat one with the pasty face.

"No good being in a hurry," rejoined the other, tall, dark and sunburnt. "We're only just beginning the game. The fellow hasn't called at Talbot House three times in one week for nothing."

Graydon and his friend parted at Piccadilly Circus, St. Maur to go northward and Eric to saunter to his rooms in Jermyn Street. He made up his mind to call the next morning on Perry and Latimer and get from them Miss Montrose's address.

He never saw the shadowy figure keeping close to the houses and tracking him wherever he went stopping when he did, and accommodating his pace to his whenever it was necessa

Graydon was in no humour for sleeping, his brain was far too excited. He walked as far as Hyde Park Corner, smoked innumerable pipes, and at last crept into his house, wearied, but in better spirits than he had been for days past.

The man who had been watching him waited until the door closed, and slunk away eastward.

The next day Eric carried out his intention of calling on the lawyers. Mr. Perry, of course, recognised him and received him affably.

"I should be happy to oblige you, but I can't give you the address of Miss Montrose without her permission."

"Certainly not," replied Eric promptly. "Will you ask for that permission?"

"Yes, I'll write to her. It will probably be a couple of days before I receive an answer."

"Two days," thought Graydon. "That will mean she is either living at a distance or may be staying with friends in the country. If she were in town, it ought not to take two days to communicate with her and to receive her answer."

At the time appointed Eric entered the solicitor's offices. Mr. Perry received him with a sly smile.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Graydon," said he

"Miss Montrose has permitted us to accede to your request. I've written down her address and here it is: Vine Cottage, Moreden, near Uxbridge."

Eric thanked the lawyer somewhat incoherently, and hurried away. What should he do? Write to her? Yes, of course. He could not call upon her as though she were living at Queen's Gate. In London one could drop in without notice, stay half-an-hour, and there would be nothing in it beyond mere politeness. But to take a journey into the country to see a lady was a much more serious affair. Had he not better write and make a second request—namely, that he might be allowed to come down and see her?

He dismissed the idea contemptuously. "Too much ceremony," he muttered. "Why not go boldly down—take her by surprise?"

He arrived at Paddington Station about a quarter past four, and found there was no train for half-an-hour. Had he not been so occupied by pleasing anticipations, he would have noticed that he was followed into the booking-office by the very man whom he was so anxious to meet—the oily, shabby-genteel individual in the trilby hat.

But he no longer wore a hat of this shape, nor was he in rusty black. A tweed suit, from its bagginess probably bought second-hand, and a bowler now distinguished him. This man was close behind Graydon when the latter took his ticket to Uxbridge, and directly he uttered the word his shadower glided away and sent off a telegram. Then he returned to the booking-office, took a ticket also for Uxbridge, and went down by the same train that conveyed Eric Graydon.

On arriving at Uxbridge, Graydon put up at an inn in the High Street, ordered a steak to be ready for him at seven o'clock, and set out to find his way to Moreden, not, indeed, to call on Alicia, but to make himself acquainted with the whereabouts of Vine Cottage. He discovered that Moreden was some two miles from Uxbridge, and that Vine Cottage was about a mile further on, a little distance down a somewhat lonely lane, which, after a circuit, curved back to the river. He was tempted to go as far as the cottage and indulge in love's young dream.

He reached the cottage and noted its isolated if picturesque situation. He was almost inclined to alter his intention of deferring his visit until the next day, and stood for some minutes debating the matter.

"It shall be to-night," he decided.

He returned to the inn sat down with a healthy appetite to his steak, and then strolled once more along the road to Moreden.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TAPPING AT THE WINDOW

ALICIA MONTROSE was walking up and down the smooth lawn, an open letter in her hand. She had chosen a pretty retreat—a charming little cottage on the banks of a branch of the Colne, near one of the prettiest villages in Buckinghamshire. The garden ran down to the clear rippling stream, and the lawn was bordered on two sides with beds slightly raised where the autumn flowers, revelling in full blown luxuriance, were beginning here and there to show signs of exhaustion.

For three weeks Alicia had passed a peaceful existence at Vine Cottage and the rest steadied her nerves, but had brought no repose to her mind. It was not merely the recollection of the tragedy that oppressed her, but something that had happened since—something that had carried her memory back five years.

Repose and inaction were not suited to her temperament. Despite its rural charm, Vine Cottage was lonely. Alicia did not feel its loneliness in the day-time, when the sun was shining and the birds twittering, but as the grey sombre evening approached, the quietude and isolation brought with them a nervous depression which at times was almost unendurable.

Part of her reasons for seeking a quiet retreat was to occupy her mind in writing a novel. She had, even before leaving school, tried her hand at literary work, not so much that she liked the drudgery and sustained effort, as that it was not only an outlet for the thoughts that at times oppressed her, but it enabled her to indulge in the romance that belonged to her nature. While she had her pen in her hand and was alone with her imaginings, she felt free. When she was in the mood she could not put down her words fast enough, and not understanding the necessity of restraint, her outpourings had a wild luxuriance which hardly commended itself to practical editors. The stories she sent to magazines came back, and she would have been discouraged had not one kindly man taken the trouble to write a few hints for her guidance which she did not fail to heed, and the result was that the next story she forwarded showed such signs of improvement that it was accepted.

This was the "work" she had alluded to in the discussion with Eric already mentioned. For the moment it was a secret. She was morbidly sensitive as to what others might think of her efforts, and at first she used a pseudonym. But she was ambitious, and she was sanguine that in time she would earn her own living without difficulty. She had long pondered over her projected novel, and she had determined to begin upon it directly David Haggar had ceased to trouble her and had gone back to Jamaica.

But fate had intervened. David Haggar no longer worried her: death had removed him but

as for trouble it had only just commenced. She had made half a dozen attempts to start the novel, but her brain seemed cast iron. It refused to travel from the groove into which it had been driven by the terrible events of that stormy July night, and neither words nor thoughts to direct them would come. Time after time she had flung down the pen in despair, and with a feeling of loneliness and a sense of discouragement that invariably ended in troublous forebodings.

At such moments she thought with a tender regret of the pleasant hours she had spent with Eric Graydon. She missed his kindly smile, his cheery voice, and his easy and sympathetic manner. He might not be very brilliant, but he was honest, and honesty, she had found, was rare in the world. She had a vague feeling that she had been wanting in gratitude, and had not shown the confidence in him that he deserved, when she altered her plans suddenly and rushed into hiding.

Apart from her literary ambition, there was another cause for the precipitate step she had taken. The cruel part was that in regard to this other cause, she dared not open her heart to Graydon. She had indeed been sorely tempted to write to him, but had fought successfully against the temptation. They had parted, she told herself, let that parting remain. She was involved in a drama on which the curtain had only just been raised, and what the next act would disclose she knew not; but let it be what it might, she would stand alone—she would bring no one else into it, and least of all Eric Graydon.

She thought she had settled her plans with regard

to him, when she was sent into a flutter by receiving a letter from Perry and Latimer, containing the request made to them by Graydon. In an instant her resolution was shaken, and her heart fought against her judgment.

"It was clever of him to enquire of Mr. Perry where I was. For all that, I must refuse. And yet—is there any harm in seeing him, say once? I promised I would let him call upon me. I ought to keep my word. It's frightfully humdrum down here, but I feel safe. There'd be no danger in telling him what I intend to do. I feel at times I must go mad unless I talk to someone."

She had moods when everything had to give way to impulse, and so she answered Mr. Perry in the affirmative, and posted the letter herself. Yet the very instant she dropped it into the box she repented, and she returned to Vine Cottage doubtful and uneasy. Then she laughed at her fears.

"I'm a fool," she cried. "It's only natural the man should be polite. He'll simply write a letter full of commonplaces, and that'll be the end of it all."

But in spite of this conclusion, and in spite of her endeavour to regard Eric Graydon's desire for her address as a simple act of courtesy, she was strangely nervous. All the next day, she could settle to nothing. Everything seemed out of gear. The piano was harsh and discordant, the books were uninteresting, even the garden and the river failed to please her. A dozen times she wished she had told the lawyer not to give Graydon her address. It would have been wiser had she said that he might write and Mr. Perry would forward his

letter. But it was too late for wishes when the thing was done.

A circumstance, trivial in itself, but in her unhinged state of mind sufficiently serious to worry her, occurred during the day. Her maid servant and only companion received a message to the effect that her mother had been suddenly taken ill, and that the girl must come home at once.

"Of course you'll have to go," said Alicia, "but can't you get a woman to come in daily while you're away? I shall be quite alone you know."

"I'll try miss. I don't like leaving you, but it can't be helped. I think I know someone in the village who'll do what you want."

It turned out, however, that the woman could not come until the morrow and so for that day Alicia would be by herself.

The hours wore on and it was dusk. The house seemed strangely lonely, and the silence and solitude got upon her nerves. She went out into the garden and stood for some time at the little wicket gate leading into the lane.

She wished that someone would pass. One or two farm labourers trudged by, and in country fashion said good night. She returned their greeting. When she no longer saw them her feeling of loneliness became more intense.

She wandered back into the garden and then down to the river, but turned from it with a shudder. The swish of the rushes, the croaking of a frog, the splash of a leaping fish were ghostly sounds.

Returning to the house through the pretty trellised porch she closed the door and bolted it, then going into the sitting room she pulled down

the blind and lit the lamp. The cheerful light dissipated her vague fears for a brief space, and she sat down to the piano, but she was not in the vein for music. Still anything was better than that depressing silence, and her hands floated over the keys without any conscious direction from her mind. Suddenly she stopped.

Her fingers had somehow wandered into an old school piece she had not played for years, a fantasia of elaborate and uninspired ornamentation which she could remember having performed at a prize-giving celebration with great success. She sprang to her feet in a tremour of nervousness

"That I should have revived that hateful piece to-night!" she cried agitatedly.

Well did she recollect the last occasion when she had played the fantasia. It was linked in her memory with a pair of dark penetrating masterful eyes, a bold handsome profile - handsome at least it appeared to her girlish fancy - an erect, it slightly swaggering carriage.

Alicia had been introduced that day to a man who was destined to play an important part in her life. He had been brought to the prize-giving function by the relatives of a fellow pupil, and his compliments, uttered in low earnest tones and with a fascinating smile, had caused her heart to flutter with a strange thrill—a thrill which almost frightened her for she had never felt anything like it before. She was then scarcely seventeen and this man appeared to realise all the fanciful wayward dreams of girlhood.

Indeed she saw in him something more than the realization of dreams He was to her a gallant

knight, a Sir Galahad who had appeared at the right moment to give her freedom and independence. Except for this romantic idea, she might not have surrendered so easily to his fascinations. As it was, she wilfully deceived herself. She certainly was not so deeply in love as to be blind to a certain flashiness in her Galahad which ought to have warned her that she was taking a leap in the dark. But a fixed resolve had possessed her. She would never marry David Haggar, and to render this impossible she had committed an act of folly which she never ceased to repent.

Haggar had made no secret of his intentions in regard to his ward. He took the proprietress into his confidence. Of course she told the governesses, and it was not long before it was known throughout the establishment that Alicia Montrose was to marry a millionaire directly she left school. The bare mention of what was in store for her always maddened the girl, and if her schoolfellows wanted to annoy her they only had to say something about "an old man's darling."

And then? That fateful meeting had ended in a romance—a romance from which all the poetry soon fled, leaving behind stern reality and vain regrets. The act of folly she had perpetrated was succeeded by bitter repentance—a repentance which came too late.

The fantasia, with its trite variations carved out in the style which has now passed away, had brought back the miserable story of her girlish impetuosity, romance and misplaced trust.

What was that?

She looked round shrinkingly. Surely there

was a tapping—a scratching at the window-pane! Why had she not closed the shutters? She dared not approach the window, and she listened with beating heart for a repetition of the sound, but it did not come. Perhaps she had alarmed herself needlessly; the sound may have been but the flapping of a loose branch of the creeper against the pane.

Then it occurred to her that it might be a messenger from the woman whom she expected on the morrow. Maybe the messenger had first knocked at the door, and receiving no response had gone round to the window. Alicia went into the hall and opened the door. There was no one. Still thinking and hoping it might be the woman or someone from her, she called her by name.

The next moment she was confronted by a man who appeared before her so suddenly he seemed to spring out of the darkness.

She shrank back with a cry of terror.

CHAPTER IX

ALICIA'S VISITOR

"I hope I haven't frightened you, Miss Montrose."

She was too terrified to fix her eyes steadily on the man, and the voice increased her fright, for she knew those rasping tones.

"I suppose I may come in?"

She could make no reply. With her hands pressed on her bosom, she leant against the wall, utterly deprived of strength.

"Silence gives consent," and without another word he entered and closed the door. She watched his proceedings in a kind of speechless terror.

"Perhaps you don't remember me, Miss Montrose. But the light isn't over good here. May I?"

He insinuated his arm within hers. She was helpless, devoid of energy and power of resistance. He led her into the room.

The lamp revealed a lean, dark, tigerish face, eyes hard, cold, and keen, lit with fierce exultation. Alicia's gaze was fixed upon him. Fascination, curiosity, were mingled with her unmistakable terror.

Five years had passed since she had last spoken with this man. She remembered it as though it were yesterday; it sounded the first note of tragedy in her existence. He had greatly altered since the

old days. He had then a dark glossy moustache, his eyes were languishing, his voice soft and insinuating. All these characteristics had changed, and the most marked difference had come about by the removal of the moustache. A mouth thin lipped, straight, cruel, was revealed.

His voice broke the silence. How strangely it sounded! It did not seem to belong to the present, but to the past. It carried her back to the time of her girlhood.

"You're alone. I saw your servant go out, and I happen to know she's not coming back. It will be pleasant to talk of old times, won't it?"

He laughed harshly, and attempted to put his arm round her waist. She recoiled, and for the first time found voice

"Don't touch me—don't touch me!" she cried, in quivering accents.

He laughed unpleasantly.

"I don't understand your sudden aversion to me, dear Alicia. We've never had a quarrel—we weren't married long enough. I admit the episode which parted us was very unfortunate, yet I thought I knew you sufficiently to believe it wouldn't make any difference in your attachment to me. The pattern wife sticks to her husband whenever misfortune may overtake him

"It isn't *that*—it isn't *that!*"

"What is it, then?" said he brusquely

She could make no reply, only cover her eyes as if to shut out the sight of him. He, too, was silent. His thin lips tightened, the tigerish glint in his eyes became more pronounced

"Suppose we keep to the main fact," he went on.

"and the main and incontrovertible fact is that you're my wife."

"A wife only in name," broke impulsively from her lips.

"You can put it that way if you like, but it makes no difference. There's some sort of antiquated belief that the separation of husband and wife for a certain number of years frees them from matrimonial obligations. It's a popular error, even when the case is one of desertion. But I've never deserted you. I was torn from you by "the minions of the law," to use a delightful melodramatic phrase, just after the nuptial knot was tied. 'Nuptial knot' is good, don't you think so?"

"What do you want?" said she, with an effort.

"Nothing but you, Alicia. You're enough to content any ordinary man surely! Yes, I want my own and—I've come to claim my own."

She suddenly turned and faced him. She had a look in her eyes which he could not meet. He knew she did not believe him.

"That is *not* your object in troubling me," said Alicia, with emphasis. "At all events, if it be, let me say I repudiate the right you assume. I don't want to see you, I'd rather not know you. Nothing can ever make me think I'm your wife. Heaven knows I've bitterly repented the day when I was mad enough to consent to marry you. Perhaps the best thing to happen was when you were arrested soon after coming out of the church. If only it had been when we were entering. Still," she added bitterly, "I was released—in a way. I should only have led a life of misery with you."

"Thank you for the compliment. May I ask how you know that?"

"I refer you to the newspapers containing an account of your trial. Your record was published in full, and there were comments on the accomplished rascal and swindler, 'Gentleman Fred,' as you were called."

"All lies," he broke out fiercely.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Lies or not, there was sufficient truth to convince me that the man who calls himself my husband is a liar and a thief. But we've said enough. Understand that no power on earth will ever make me acknowledge you as my husband."

"That w[illegible] alter the fact that you're my wife. To go back to the time when you *were*—say what you like *now*—in love with me, you can't accuse me of any wrong-doing towards you."

"No wrong-doing in entrapping me into a marriage? Why, that *was* the wrong-doing. Wasn't it shown at the trial that you were utterly penniless, that you lived on your wits—in other words, that you lived by swindling? Did you tell me anything of that when you persuaded me to run away from a life that was irksome—a life that I fled from just because I had not sufficient patience to endure it, and—and for other reasons? No, you passed yourself off to me as a man of property, a man of good family, a man who had no care or thought in the world save for me. Was it extraordinary I should have listened to you? Ah, I hate myself now when I think of it!"

She trembled violently. Yet surely there was something else about this man which frightened

her more than the recollection of that fatal act of hers, and the consciousness that by law he could claim her as his wife?

"Don't let us quarrel," said he, in a tone of penitence. "Supposing I admit, for the sake of argument, that all you've said is true, still I've one redeeming point. I loved you then, Alicia, I swear I did—I love you now."

His words only increased her terror.

"Go—go!" she cried, pointing to the door. "It's torture for me to listen to you."

"Torture?" he repeated. "Why on earth should it be torture? Say I'm a rogue, a swindler, a thief, how can that affect the question of love? You must have loved me in the old days, or you wouldn't have married me."

"You forget that I was but seventeen and a schoolgirl. What does a schoolgirl know of love?"

"Well, we needn't discuss *that* point. Love or no love, we're married."

"Oh, it's intolerable!" she cried, throwing up her arms. "What am I to do—what am I to do?"

"If you take my tip you'll say nothing and do nothing. I've got my plans about you, and that's why I've chosen to look you up. I dare say I'm a superfluous person, but you can't get rid of me. The English marriage laws are beautifully constructed. Wom God hath joined let no man put asunder—and all that sort of thing. I fancy in our case it was the devil who did the joining business. He likes to meddle in such matters. Anyhow, my three years penal isn't ground for a divorce, and if it were I'm not so sure you'd make use of it."

"Why not?" she asked fiercely.

"Oh, there are reasons—I leave you to guess them. But we needn't waste time in talking about what might be. I'm only concerned with things as they are. Judging from what I've read in the papers, you haven't had a bad time the last three years—plenty of money and nothing to do, and a million or so awaiting you whenever you chose to say yes. Why didn't you say yes?"

"That's no concern of yours."

"I beg your pardon. It *is* my concern. There's such a thing as bigamy. Thanks to the newspapers I know all about you. Seems to me you certainly messed up the thing. Why didn't you marry the old chap?"

"So that you could have blackmailed me?"

"Well of course *that* was on. But out of England you'd have been safe. I doubt whether I should have bothered about you although—" he paused and fixed his eyes upon her. "Yes, I think I should. A thousand pities you're not old Haggar's widow. His lawyer said at the inquest that the old man died without making a will. If you'd married him, the fact of there being no will wouldn't have mattered a row of beans. You'd have had his fortune all the same."

"In spite of my having committed bigamy?"

"Humph! That would have made a little difference supposing you'd chosen to be up against me. But we could easily have come to some arrangement. Anyhow, you're *not* the old man's widow, so we needn't talk about it. Would you like to know how I found you out? By accident. I saw in the papers what had happened, and I made it my business to go to Winchester and

ascertain whether the Miss Alicia Montrose mentioned was *my* Alicia Montrose. Of course she was, and I thought it a very curious coincidence."

"*What* was a curious coincidence?" she demanded quickly.

"That I should find my wife," he paused, as if he wanted to drive home the word—"in such an odd way."

"Why didn't you make yourself known to me when you were at Winchester?"

"At Winchester?"

"Yes. I saw you at the railway station—you and another man."

"And did you see me at the inquest?"

"*You* were at the inquest, *you?*"

"Of course. I wanted to satisfy myself. As it turned out, I needn't have troubled, you were pretty well in evidence—you and the Johnnie who was hanging around. Not a very nice thing for me—your husband—to see. I wasn't the only one who saw. The newspaper men were buzzing round you and the bounder, and a pretty song some of the papers have made of the thing. Have you seen the *Scorpion?* I've a copy here. You'd better take note of what's being said about you."

He dragged the paper from his pocket. It was folded so as to show the reproduction of the photographs. She cast a momentary glance at the page, but was silent.

"Well?" he exclaimed impatiently.

"It doesn't interest me."

"Do you really mean that? Are you so much in love with the fellow that you don't mind having

your name mixed up with his? But I guess you two have made your own arrangements."

"That's an insult," she suddenly flashed out, "and if your object in coming here was to make gross insinuations, I have but one answer—there's the door, go."

"When I've said to you all that's in my mind and not before. Understand this, Alicia, a man's a right to be angry when ihs wife's the subject of scandal——"

"Pray don't trouble. I can take care of myself," she interrupted.

"I'm not so sure. If you must have a lover, I guess it's safer to do your love-making in London than in a quiet country place where tongues wag and where people have nothing to do but gossip and slander. It won't be long before it gets noised about that this fellow Graydon's visiting you here."

Alicia's heart sank. How did the man know that Graydon was likely to call upon her? It must surely be pure assumption. Mr. Perry would hardly betray her. Her husband's next words filled her with dismay.

"Supposing I drop a note to the *Scorpion*. It would give colour to one theory the paper's started, wouldn't it?" he sneered.

"And what *is* the theory, pray?"

"That you and Graydon were old acquaintances that you recognised him at Waterloo—that you left Haggar on purpose to join him."

"It is a tissue of falsehoods. But even supposing the story were true, it has nothing to do with what happened to that poor old man May

I ask if this wretched paper has evolved any theory of the murder?"

"No—nothing definite."

"Why doesn't it suggest that I left Mr. Haggar to travel alone, so as to give my accomplice an opportunity of attacking him? Perhaps that accomplice was the man the police are so anxious to find. What do *you* think, Mr. —— by the way, you haven't told me your present name. I can hardly imagine you're using your old one."

"You may as well know. It's Douglas to you and some of my pals."

He was silent for quite a minute.

"How do we stand over this business, Alicia? Are we friends or enemies? It doesn't matter a pin to me, but I should like to know—for your sake."

"For my sake? Please explain."

"No necessity. You're sharp enough to appreciate the position. There's only one thing I should advise you to bear in mind—whatever happens, I'm bound to look after myself, and to do that I stop at nothing—don't forget—at *nothing*."

"Yes, I see that; but it doesn't frighten me."

"Very well. What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. I only wish to be left alone. I never want to see you again."

She could not repress a shudder. He stood glaring at her, and wondering why her loathing for him only tempted him the more to throw his arms about her and stifle her scorn with kisses.

"What's the good of my promising you *that*, Alicia? For the moment I won't trouble you, but if I find it necessary of course I shall look you up. Now that I've run you to earth I'll never lose sight

of you. I'm not going to forget that you're my wife."

"As you're so anxious *I* should not forget it, wouldn't it be well if you made the fact public? It would at least satisfy public curiosity as to the reason why I refused to marry David Haggar."

He laughed jeeringly. He saw his chance.

"Oh, no doubt, and set tongues wagging in another direction. The *Scorpion* would at last have something definite to write about. The story would run something like this: Wife at seventeen. Husband arrested almost at church door, tried for forgery, and sent for three 'stretch' to the Dartmoor Hotel—wife goes back to school—rich old Johnnie supposed to be her guardian—comes from Jamaica and makes a fool of himself over her. Pays all her expenses, makes her no end of presents. Old Johnnie pegs out, and girl says he wanted to marry her, but that's only *her* tale, there's no proof—young Johnnie comes along—they spoon, *vide* photograph—of course she can't marry him on account of her convict husband, but both being up-to-date, this little obstacle makes no difference and there you are. Very pretty reading when embellished by the *Scorpion*, eh, my darling?"

It was a coarse way of putting the position, and coming from the man's lips it sounded horrible, but it was hardly an exaggeration as to how people would interpret the story. Nine-tenths of her critics would regard her as an adventuress. A woman is so readily condemned and her word so rarely believed. Her husband put her thoughts into words.

"The story'll go down like hot cakes. If you

were not so confoundedly handsome, Alicia, you might have a chance of defending yourself, but the more beautiful the woman the more likely she is to be wicked. That's the judgment of the world. The only pull plain women have is that their ugliness puts them outside temptation. The *Scorpion* already calls you 'The Woman with the Eyes' after that, anything might be laid at your door so far as men are concerned."

Alicia remained mute. The talk was as repulsive as the presence of the man. Her one desire was that he would go soon, but she dared not betray herself lest he should stay on purpose to aggravate her. Then the frightful thought flashed through her mind that he might insist upon remaining altogether. It was within his right to do so, and she would be powerless to prevent him. Again he interpreted her thought.

"You've got a dashed snug little place here, Alicia. Just the retreat for a man who's been buffetting ill fortune until he's pretty well sick of the game. I've half a mind to take up my quarters here and——"

"No!"

The word was uttered in a low penetrating tone. Alicia advanced towards him. A menacing light was in her eyes—so menacing, indeed, that he retreated a pace.

"You dare not force my hand," she whispered. "And you know why."

Had she shrieked, had she used threats, he would not have been deterred, but her manner was so calm, her face so rigid and stern, he was cowed.

"Bah, it was only my joke," he rejoined, with an

uneasy laugh. "You've done without me so long, probably I should be only in your way. Good-bye, my dear wife—for the present."

He raised his hat with a mocking gesture. Then he went into the passage, and the shutting of the door announced that he was gone. For a few seconds she remained still as a statue, unable, almost afraid, to move. She had the horrible suspicion that he might still be in the house, that slamming the door was but a ruse. But she heard the creak of the garden gate—how she blessed that rusty hinge, it was the sweetest music just then—and the torpid blood suddenly set in circulation rushed tumultuously through her heart; every nerve in her body quivered, her eyes were hot, the veins in her temples throbbed, and she pushed back her hair with fingers that felt like ice on her burning forehead.

"Is it possible," she murmured. "I once imagined I loved this man! My husband! Merciful heaven, to think of it!"

CHAPTER X

THE WORK OF "SUPPRESSION"

After the creaking of the garden gate with its rusty hinges, the flare of a lighted match pierced the darkness for a few seconds, and disappeared to give place to a spot of vivid red, which in its turn slowly vanished. The aro[illegible] [illegible]ich followed told the quality of the cigar. Dougl[illegible] [illegible]ways smoked a choice brand, even if he had to [illegible] without his dinner to enable him to find the money.

"What a change in five years," he muttered. "She was only a slip of a schoolgirl when we were married, and now by Jove, she's lovely, she's glorious. What about me? I guess the three 'stretch,' and the beastly rocky time that followed dug a few lines in my phizog. That's the crux I'll have to get over with Alicia—apart from other things. 'Gentlemen Fred' in the old days! What price now? Well, if I have a bit of luck, I'll soon get rid of my hangdog looks."

Douglas had quitted his wife with a sense of defeat. His failure to intimidate her, her contempt, stung him to the quick. His crooked way of life had not merely deadened his moral nature, but had accentuated his animal passions, with the result that they mastered him when things went wrong. Like most criminals he was inordinately vain and the contrast between himself and his wife

the consciousness of her infinite superiority, made him long to sink her to his level.

This he knew was impossible. But to trample on her feelings ; to wring her heart, to embitter her existence, might be within his reach. A scheme to enrich himself through his wife was simmering in his crafty brain. He had had a glimmer of hope that he might regain the ascendancy which he thought he had five years before, when, after a few stolen love meetings, she consented to marry him, but he was shrewd enough to see that this hope would never be realised. Alicia was not to be frightened or coaxed or fooled. He would certainly not get a shred of assistance from her. It was something to think that all she wanted was to be let alone

"Well, I'll let her alone," he muttered. "I can play my game without her—the beginning of it anyhow. But what if she has that bounder constantly dangling at her side? Curse him! I'll

A low whistle came from the darkness. Douglas responded with a similar whistle, and shrank into the shadow of the trees. In a few seconds he was joined by Rookson, puffing and blowing

"What's up?" growled Douglas

"Nothing much, but you were going at the double and I thought I'd give you the tip. In another minute you'd have met the very man we're here to shadow

"He's taken stock of the place once. What the devil does he mean by coming down again

"Love, old chap, love. He's fairly gone on the 'woman with the eyes.' It's plain enough. He

come down here on purpose to see her, you bet, and he can't keep away from the house that contains her—he worships the ground she walks upon—she's all his fancy painted her, she's lovely, she's divine and all the rest of the tommy-rot. I was rather in a fix when I saw him strolling along. I thought he was going straight to the house, and says I, knowing that you hadn't come out, the band'll play directly. However, he only stood and looked at the place, smoked a cig., walked away, came back, looked again, and he's only just slung his hook."

"He's worth taking on," whispered Douglas rapidly. "We'd make a fiver easily on that red wack (gold watch) of his."

"I dare say," rejoined Rookson, with a grimace. "Not quite in my line. A little too stiff built in the shoulders and free in his walk for me. Cricketer and footballer, I'll go bail. Not quite the same thing as 'snatching' in a crowd with a 'bonnet' to cover one."

"Shut up, you idiot. I'm going for him. Come on."

Rookson, unable to resist his companion's masterful will, obeyed, but very reluctantly. The two men rapidly sped over the grass at the roadside, their footsteps quite inaudible. An arm shot up erect and swiftly descended. Two crashing blows, and then came the sound of a falling body.

The next moment Eric Graydon was stretched on the ground, his white face upturned to the moonlit sky. His head lay in an ominously dark slowly widening circle.

It was Douglas who struck the blow. Rookson stood by, his pretty face convulsed with terror.

"You didn't tell me you were going to do *this*," he whispered huskily.

"Bah, what's done's done. Make the best of it. If you don't want a share of the plunder, you needn't take it on, you know."

The argument was convincing. Rookson joined in, and the two ghoul-like figures bent over the prostrate Eric. They were skilled in the art of robbery, and they deftly turned every pocket inside out.

"We'd better clear out sharp, hadn't we?" whispered Rookson, when there was nothing left to take.

"Not before we've made ourselves safe. Sling him over yonder gate and then put him behind the hedge. That'll give us four-and-twenty hours' start, perhaps more."

Rookson was reluctant to touch their ugly handiwork. He stood hesitatingly looking downward at the prostrate insensible figure.

"What are you waiting for?" demanded Douglas savagely.

"He's not—dead—is he?"

"Oh, *that's* what's frightening you, is it?"

Douglas was stooping and waiting for Rookson's help. He put his hand over Graydon's heart.

"No," said he presently. "He's got some life left in him. I won't say what may happen before morning. Don't stand there like a gibbering scarecrow. Get to work—quick."

Hardly had the two laid their hands on their victim, one grasping the shoulders and the other seizing the legs, than the hoofs of a trotting horse and the grating sound of wheels were heard in the

distance. The gate was quite six yards away; they had not time to carry out the plan of concealment.

"Curse it. Take him to the ditch. It's in shadow," growled Douglas.

It was all they could do, and they did it. Then they sped away towards Uxbridge. It was quite three hours before the mounted patrol trotted past the spot and discovery came about.

An hour afterwards Eric Graydon was lying in the infirmary. "Scalp wound and concussion of the brain" was written on the card over the bed. There was not a solitary thing upon him by which identity could be established. The miscreants had done their work well, and the local police had no doubt in deciding that it was a simple case of assault and robbery.

Meanwhile Douglas and Rookson were walking at a rapid pace towards Uxbridge. They would have preferred to run, but this might attract attention. It was not late, and already they had met more people than was altogether safe. Rookson was the first to take alarm.

"Look here, Bert," he whispered uneasily. "I'm not going back to Paddington."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Work round to Ruislip and book to Marylebone."

"It's risky. Precious few trains from Ruislip. West Drayton's much better."

"No. Didn't I tell you I wasn't going to Paddington?"

"What's frightening you at Paddington?"

"That Scotland Yard devil—Shagford. I caught sight of him just as I was getting into the train

n I was shadowing the young toff. I don't unk he saw me, but one never knows what a 'tec sees and what he doesn't. I didn't bother about the beggar, because you didn't tell me what your game was down here. I thought it was nothing more than keeping the swell in sight. If I'd known the idea was something else, you'd never have got me to join in with you."

"Too late to talk about what you would have done, Jimmy. You're in for the whole hog. Make up your mind to *that*. What sends you into such a funk about Shagford?"

"Because he was the one who copped me over the job that put me away."

"H'm—it's a bit up against you."

"And against you, too. Seems to me, Bert, I've been pulling the chestnuts out of the fire."

"That's all tommy rot. I've paid for everything you've done for me."

"I know, but you haven't run straight. You kidded me that all you wanted was to find out what had become of Miss Montrose, and that you thought the best way to do it would be to shadow Graydon, as he was bound sooner or later to see her."

"Well—and that's come about, hasn't it?"

"I don't know. How should I? You've been so precious close over the whole business, I can't tell what to think. Anyhow, I never thought it would come to what it has. Why did you down the young chap?"

"Because I wanted some oof, Jimmy."

"That's a lie."

"All right; it's a lie. What then?"

"Just this; I'd like to know what's going on. I've been in the dark too long."

"My good friend, there's a time for everything, and the time for taking you into my confidence isn't the present moment. But I can tell you this: the scheme I'm turning over in my mind is going to be the biggest thing I ever took up. It wants some thinking out, and just now all I can do is to clear the way. I foresaw that Mr. Eric Graydon might cause me trouble, so he had to be suppressed. Now do you see?"

"No."

"Of course you don't; but it's all that's necessary to tell you just now. I shall look you up at your diggings before the week's out, and let you know a little more."

Rookson stared with astonishment at the man's coolness and confidence. That the police might be on his track and that before long he would be in custody, did not appear to trouble him in the least. Rookson was naturally a coward, and always had to depend upon some bolder spirit to show him the way. He had had a good many partners—sometimes a man, but more often a woman—during his fitful career of crookedness, alternated with occasional lapses into honest work, but he had never had a partner of such daring as Bert Douglas. Douglas was beginning to frighten him.

By this time they had reached the bridge crossing the river Colne, and they entered a public-house to have a drink and enquire the way to Ruislip. The landlord told them, saying that it was about a four-mile walk.

"I'm going to chance Uxbridge station," said

Douglas, as they came out of the public-house. "You make for Ruislip. It's safer to separate."

Rookson agreed and slunk away, keeping close to the houses and hedges and walls as he was prone to do. Douglas on the other hand strode along to Uxbridge station as though he had not a care in the world.

He booked to Paddington and reached the terminus without anything happening to disturb him, for Eric Graydon was still lying in the dry ditch, and the hue and cry was not raised for an hour after Douglas was safe in his lodgings.

CHAPTER XI

DOUGLAS STARTS HIS CAMPAIGN

It would be hard to find a more curious corner of London, in its way, than that grimy and sordid collection of streets bounded by the Euston Road on the north and the Gray's Inn Road on the east. The "lay" of the various thoroughfares is peculiar. A stranger would very soon lose himself, and if attempting to take a short cut would find himself back at the spot he started from.

A week after the grim episode at Uxbridge, Douglas got out of an omnibus at Manor Street, a thoroughfare bordered on each side by dingy, smoke-begrimed houses with shabby, faded blinds, and doors the paint of which had long since been cracked and blistered by the sun.

After several turnings and twistings he reached a sinister-looking street, one end of which was blocked up by a huge hoarding, and knocked at the door of one of the shabbiest residences. He was admitted by a middle-aged woman with a pale, unwholesome face, unkempt carroty hair, and a general untidy aspect.

"Shall I find Mr. Rookson upstairs?"

"Oh, yes, you'll find him—worse luck!" retorted the woman.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, there's nothing the matter, 'cept as I don't

like people as don't pay their rent," she replied with a snort.

"Don't you worry about that. Rookson's a little bit hard up just now, but he'll be all right presently.

The woman muttered something not very complimentary to her lodger, and disappeared down a dark staircase, leaving Douglas to grope his way upstairs to the door of the second floor back.

"Who's that?" growled a husky voice from the interior.

"It's all right—Bert."

A click—the door was unlocked, and a smug, leaden-coloured face appeared in the opening. The owner of the face was arrayed in a shabby, tattered dressing-gown, shabby trousers and slippers, and looked altogether frowsy, disreputable, evil.

The room reeked with rank tobacco-smoke, mixed with a suggestion of stale beer. A miserable fire smoked in the grate, and added its contribution to the foulness of the atmosphere. The wind was in the wrong direction to suit the chimney, and every now and again came a puff of choking mephitic vapour into the room.

"Any luck, old chap?" he whispered nervously.

"Perhaps—and perhaps not."

Douglas strode into the room. Possibly its sordid comfortless aspect affected him, for he seized the poker and tried to rake the fire into a blaze. But there was only a handful of cinders in the grate, and he simply made matters worse. He threw the poker down with a clatter.

"What a beastly hole."

"You find me a better one, then," retorted Mr. Rookson. "You might have left my fire alone. You haven't known me seven years and you hadn't no right to touch it. That's the last of my coals, and see what you've done."

"Don't try to be funny, Rookson. The comic man's not on in this scene."

Douglas standing with his back to the grate, eyed the empty beer jug on the table

"I suppose your landlady's not game to fetch any beer?"

"Well," said Rookson, with rather a comical look in his pig-like eyes, and fingering his chin doubtfully, "we're not on the best of terms. She's a bit hungry after money, and I haven't been able to satisfy her. I hoped you'd have been able to spring a quid just to make things pleasant."

"We'll talk about that later on," rejoined Douglas abruptly. "In the meantime I'm horribly thirsty."

"I'll go and get the stuff," said Rookson, rising with alacrity

"You just keep your seat. I guess you haven't seen to-day's paper or you wouldn't talk about going out. Just read that."

Douglas pushed a newspaper into Rookson's haky hand, and pointed to a paragraph. Rookson's face went greenish as he read, and what he read was this:

"The police are in possession of certain information which they hope will lead to the capture of one of the miscreants concerned in the murderous assault near Uxbridge. It has been ascertained that on the evening in question, a man who has

undergone penal servitude, went down by the train to the quiet little town. He was seen to get into the train by a detective who was well acquainted with him. Of the other—the footprints show that two were engaged in the affair—nothing is known. The injured man still lies in the infirmary in an unconscious condition, and he has not been identified."

"That's a bit up against you," said Douglas, eyeing the scared Jim.

"Maybe, but I'm not the only one in the job, and don't you forget it, Bert Douglas," retorted Rookson

"Not likely to, old chap. But I can look after myself, and after you too. It's my interest to do so, and I'm going to prove it in a very practical sense I'm going to fetch the beer rather than let you expose yourself to the night air and the probability of being copped."

Douglas took the jug and stalked out of the room. Rookson sank into a chair and stared at the fire, which was trying to struggle into a blaze, gnawing his nails and muttering to himself.

"I'd give anything to find out Bert's little game," he muttered. "He put me on to shadow that young swell, and I did shadow him—from Winchester to Southampton, from Southampton to London, to his rooms in Jermyn Street, to the Caffy Universal—where we both saw him; to the lawyer's office, and down to Uxbridge. Here Bert joined me, and then——" A little shudder made the fellow's body quiver. "That kind of job's not in my way," he went on. "I believe I was a fool when I palled on with Bert Douglas. If I'd

kept on as a waiter I don't think I should have done badly, 'specially with a bit o' comic singing now and again at free and easies and friendly leads. I'd like to get back to the old game, but

Mr. Rookson finished the sentence with a little shiver. Then Douglas entered with the beer, and the two divided it between them

"See here, Rookson. I can let you have that quid you talked about; but mind, you'll have to do something for it, and what you do will mean some more coin."

"That'll suit me down to the ground," rejoined Rookson, in a tone of apparent cheerfulness. "What is it you want me to do not anything like that last affair, because I tell you straight, I won't I'd rather give myself up and go back to the Dartmoor hotel

"You needn't worry. This particular job is quite in your line. You're a dabster with pen and ink, aren't you?"

"There isn't a signature or a handwriting that I can't imitate," said Rookson, with a look of conscious pride. "I don't care if it did get me into trouble. The prosecution said the job was well done, and so it was."

"Exactly, so I've been told. Now look here, when you were at the Empress Hotel where I unearthed you running straight, so you said, which I take leave to doubt there was an old chap staying there who had come from Jamaica His name was David Haggar. Do you remember?"

"Why, of course. Not likely to forget, when the poor old buffer's name's been in the papers again and again over that Winchester affair. D've

think I don't know nothing? What about the young gent as you put me on to shadow and who—but I'm not going to say too much. It was a dirty trick not to tell me what the thing meant. If I'd known, you wouldn't have got me to go shares."

Rookson was anything but Douglas's equal. Douglas had a careless gentlemanly air about him which he never quite lost even in his most debased moods. Rookson was always—the waiter. They were pals in a sense, but Douglas took the lead in everything, and snubbed or bantered or threatened Rookson as the circumstances demanded. Just now Rookson was crushed.

"I've got a big thing under weigh, and if I pull it off, it'll mean a few hundred quid in your pocket," went on Douglas slowly. "Your part in the concern is as easy as an old glove. I only want you to imitate David Haggar's handwriting."

"Ask me another. I never saw the old chap's fist. And if I had, it 'ud be no good. I must have something to go upon right before my eyes."

Douglas took out a pocket-book, and from one of the divisions extracted a letter and unfolded it.

"There," said he, "that's old Haggar's crabbed handwriting. Not a difficult one to imitate. I fancy?"

Rookson took the letter, held it close to the paraffin lamp, and studied the characters intently.

"No, it's not difficult."

"Right then; take down what I tell you."

Rookson drew a chair to the table, and with pen in hand waited for the other to speak. Meanwhile Douglas was walking up and down the room, his

hands behind him, meditating. At last he commenced to dictate as follows :—

"I, David Haggar, being of sound mind and body, execute this document as my last will and testament. I leave everything of which I die possessed unconditionally to Alicia Montrose, the daughter of my dear old friend, George Montrose. At the time of writing this, I hope that before long she will become my wife, but whether she does or not will make no difference in my intentions. I wish her to take my entire fortune without any restrictions whatever. Signed in the presence of James Rookson and "

"Here, stop it!" exclaimed Rookson, looking up when Douglas had reached thus far. "That's all kid, you know."

"Exactly, all kid. But for all that it's going to pass as gospel truth," said Douglas coolly. "You'll have to fancy you witnessed David Haggar's signature, and if you fancy hard enough you'll come to believe that you did. We shall want another witness to make the thing perfectly regular and legal. Do you know anyone who has as powerful an imagination as yourself?"

"Dash it all!" grumbled Rookson. "What's it going to be worth to me? I want to know something definite before I go any further."

"It'll be worth £100 to you, perhaps more," rejoined Douglas impatiently. "But it'll be no good unless you find the other witness."

"And where's he to come from?"

"That's for you to say. But it needn't be 'he'—'she' will do just as well," said Douglas, with a sardonic smile. "Just think. If there's

anybody you can light on who was with you at the 'Empress,' so much the better."

Rookson threw the pen down and buried his fat chin in his hands.

"There's a little girl, Jenny Bassett, one of the chambermaids, who got the sack for sneaking a lady's purse—at least, she was suspected of sneaking it; there was no direct evidence against her—she was far too clever—who might do."

"Is she to be trusted?" asked Douglas.

"As much as a woman can be. They're all more or less artful, you know. Still, if the fancy takes her, a woman can keep a secret better than a man."

"Is she to be got at easily?"

"Oh, I can get at her whenever I like," said Rookson, with a knowing, greasy smile.

"Very well. Listen, this is the idea. David Haggar made this will one afternoon when ——"

Douglas broke off. It was too soon to fix precise details. He must have more data to go upon.

"What sort of girl is Jenny Bassett?" he asked.

"Jenny? All eyes and ears—one of those cat-like little women always listening at keyholes and that sort of thing."

Douglas liked this description. Jenny Bassett might be of great use to him. He was inclined to negotiate direct with her, rather than leave it to Rookson.

"Very well," said he after a pause; "then we won't make it any fixed date. Of course the will must be dated, but date and signature might come at any time afterwards. Anyhow, what you've got

to fix in your mind is that at a certain time on a certain day, Haggar rang for you, and asked you to witness his signature, and to get someone else also to do the same thing; and when he had signed, you two were to put your names to the paper, each in the presence of the other."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Rookson. "Do you suppose I don't know all about making a will and signing it too?"

"Of course you do. I only want to rehearse this business because it's important. Where's Jenny Bassett to be seen?" went on Douglas abruptly.

"I'll look her up."

"Damn you—you won't stir out of this house till I tell you it's safe to do so," rejoined Douglas in his grating voice, sinister in its suggestiveness.

"Of course not, of course not," said Rookson hastily. "But there's no harm in writing to her."

"Does she know where you are living?"

"The last time I saw her I was very hard up; in fact, I hadn't got enough for a fourpenny doss. It was just after I ran across you. I got her her present situation, though," he added, with a self-satisfied chuckle.

"Wrote her a false reference, I suppose?"

"Yes. Usual thing—lady going abroad—sorry to part with a trustworthy maid—addressed it from a newspaper shop on the other side of London at the cost of one penny. The thing came off all right. I can do a woman's handwriting to perfection."

"And where is she now?"

"Eaton Square—housemaid. You can't mis-

take her—little woman, with black snaky eyes, fresh colour, soft voice, and looks as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth."

"I'll spot her. Now then, you set to work and practise that handwriting. There's the sovereign I promised you, and expect me to-morrow evening with the proper foolscap paper for that precious document."

He flung down the coin, and, grasping Rookson by the shoulders, said meaningly:

"Don't forget what I told you about lying low. At present you're safe, but until the scent is cold don't show your nose in the streets."

The next moment he turned on his heel, and with a strange, cat-like tread that he could assume when he liked, quitted the room.

The summer holidays were over, but many of the West End Mansions had still their blinds drawn down, and looked desolate enough. This was the case with the house in Eaton Square. The door was open, and a footman was lounging on the broad steps. He was on board wages, he had nothing to do but gossip, and he had no one to gossip with. So when Douglas approached him with an affable "good evening," he answered in a very different manner from that which he would have assumed had he been in livery, and his hair plastered and powdered. He gave a peculiar snigger when Douglas went on to enquire whether there was a housemaid on the staff named Jenny Bassett.

"Old friend of Jenny's?"

"I used to know her some time ago."

"Ah—well, she's left."

"Where's she gone?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"That's more than I can say. That sort of woman's here to-day and gone to-morrow. Fact is, service didn't suit Jenny and Jenny didn't suit service. I'll wager she knew a thing or two before she came here. Anyhow, she didn't get on with our housekeeper—cheeked her, so she got the bullet."

"Just what I should expect. Do you know where she's to be found? I've heard of a post that's likely to suit her but—have you got five minutes to spare? We'll have a drink if you don't mind."

The proposition was very acceptable, and the two adjourned to a quiet hostelry where the man was evidently well known. He was of a friendly disposition, and he confided to Douglas that Jenny was now "on her own."

"You're a man of the world, I'll bet," said he, with a wink. "You know what I mean. Between you and me and the gatepost, I doubt if Jenny's making a fortune. Too much competition. Jenny's only a bit of a thing, and the tall swagger women get the pull of the little women. Not always though, if it comes to a fair fight. Jenny always has her wits about her, and she's got the cheek of the devil. I shouldn't waste much time over her if the post you offer means running straight. Of course she'll be awfully obliged to you—tell you she'd give anything to be able to turn up what she's doing—they all say that—but you may take my word for it, if she gets a sit and it isn't on velvet, she'll chuck it in a week."

Douglas knew this as well as or better than his informant, but he explained that he'd like to give Jenny a chance, if he only knew where to find her.

"Look here," said his new friend suddenly. "Do you know the 'Crown and Cushion' Derby Street, Piccadilly?"

Douglas nodded. No one had a wider acquaintance with West End public-houses than he. This knowledge was part of his professional training of the past two years. "Crooks" have all of them their favourite "houses of call" and like flocks to like.

"It's now ten o'clock. If you start at once you'll most likely catch her. She's generally at the 'Crown and Cushion' between half-past ten and eleven. Stays there until the theatres and music halls begin to turn out. Don't say I told you she might think I'd given her away. She's not a bad sort if you don't put her back up. She can be a little terror if she likes."

Douglas promised, and after standing his new friend another drink, he departed.

Derby Street was a short thoroughfare running between Piccadilly and the Quadrant. The "Crown and Cushion" had a very small "public" and a long "saloon" bar. Most of the Crown's patrons were saloon customers. Men of the kind known as "cheap swells," were lounging at the bar, eyeing some half a dozen women sitting listlessly on the crimson plush "lounge," each with a glass of liquor on the table in front. They were dressed in finery obviously bought at a second-hand wardrobe shop, and more or less tawdry, and they sipped their drink at long intervals to eke it out. Most of them

had probably spent their last penny so that they might rest in the light and warmth. None of them paid any attention to the would-be oglers at the bar. Experience had taught them to sum up men, and they knew there was not one of the oglers worth powder and shot.

Douglas took stock of the dejected faces, and picked out one which seemed to correspond with the description of Jenny Bassett given by Rookson and the Eaton Square servant. She had a smooth face and sleepy-looking eyes with long dark lashes, which she had an attractive way of drooping and lifting when a man glanced at her. Douglas ordered a drink, and without hesitation sat down by her side.

"Well, how goes it, Jenny?" said he in the familiar tone of an old acquaintance.

The dark eyes regarded him cautiously and not altogether with favour. No doubt the easy-mannered stranger had met her somewhere. How could she tell? At that moment Douglas did not look very prosperous, and she did not take the trouble to make eyes at him.

"Oh, same as usual," said she crossly. "On the rock. If you're going to stand me a drink, you'd better do it sharp," and her eyes went to the clock.

Douglas fetched her what she fancied—a bottle of Guinness—and started chatting on the topics Jenny and her sisterhood are always ready to discuss; the hardness of the times; the tyranny and extortion of landladies at home, the absence of money abroad, and the meanness of men everywhere

Gradually Jenny thawed and she became amusing. She had considerable powers of mimicry, could tell a story very well, and had a supreme contempt for married women. Douglas could be very companionable when he liked, and as acquaintanceship under promiscuous circumstances often grows as swiftly as Jonah's gourd, the two were soon excellent friends.

Then Douglas broached the subject which had led him to seek out Jenny. All he wanted her to do was to shadow a certain lady. The commission would not interfere with what she chose to do in other directions; all her expenses would be paid, and he could guarantee her a pound a week.

"I know it's not as much as you're worth, Jenny, but it's going to lead to something else which may pour hundreds into your pocket. Of course it's a spec, but if it comes off it'll be a big thing."

The occupation was one thoroughly to Jenny Bassett's taste. If she had not taken early to thieving, she might have blossomed into a lady detective—the qualifications required for both are much the same—but it was too late now to be anything but a "copper's nark," and she had far too much spirit and independence to descend so low.

She at first turned up her nose at the terms, but after much haggling agreed to "take on the job" at five-and-twenty shillings a week. Then Douglas gave her precise directions, and the two parted at Piccadilly Circus.

CHAPTER XII

JENNY BASSETT THE SPY

For the moment everything was driven from Alicia's mind save the dread of seeing her husband again. She was afraid of him and she could not think of him without a shudder. Until fate had thrust him into her path, she had striven to forget her marriage—to look upon it as something she had read in fiction. It seemed so unreal. Yet it was true—too true! Revived as it had been, the story of her girlhood stood out before her fevered vision.

She paced the room, and her thoughts revolved in her brain like a squirrel in its cage, always coming back to the same starting point. She could only wonder if her husband suspected what was in her mind. It was hardly possible that he did not, yet she felt he went from her in perfect confidence that he had nothing to fear. Indeed, had he been afraid he would hardly have visited her.

Then came another haunting thought. How did the appearance of her husband on the scene influence her in regard to Eric Graydon? Surely it locked, bolted, and barred everything concerning him. She was glad now, so she tried to persuade herself, that Graydon had neither written nor come. It was more imperative than ever that she should forget him.

Yet had she known that it was Eric Graydon who had been nearly done to death within a short distance of Vine Cottage, she might have taken a different view of the position. But this she did not know. For a whole week Eric remained in the infirmary unidentified. There was nothing extraordinary in this. Everything upon him that could have made it known who he was had been taken. Davis was too used to the vagaries of his master to trouble. Besides, Eric had told his man that he might be away for some days, and had never mentioned where he was going. Nor did it strike Percy and Latimer that he meant to visit Moreden. As for his travelling bag, that was lying unclaimed in the cloak room of Uxbridge station. Of course when consciousness returned, everything would be explained, but for the moment the police had not solved the mystery.

So Alicia still lingered at Vine Cottage, torn by conflicting emotions in which horror of Douglas, as her husband now called himself, and a yearning to see Eric Graydon once more, if it were only to say good-bye, struggled for mastery. In her wavering thoughts, she could not help wondering why Eric had not availed himself of her permission to call upon her. Though she was convinced that his silence was for the best, she felt at times disappointed, and immediately after was angry because of her disappointment. What could it matter whether Eric Graydon came or not, she asked herself one moment, puzzling her brains the next in trying to find the reason which kept him away.

At the end of a week her irresolution passed.

She had given Eric Graydon his chance, and he had allowed it to slip. It was now left for her to protect herself against her husband, and she decided to call on the house agent from whom she had taken Vine Cottage, and make some arrangement with him.

Meanwhile the copy of the *Society Scorpion* left behind by her husband, had been lying unopened. Alicia could not for some time bring herself to read what the paper said about her. How at last she came to do so, she could not explain. The scurrilous sneering remarks sent her white with indignation. Then trembling from a feeling of shame, she threw the paper from her, for it flashed across her mind that it was the writer's base insinuations which had kept Eric Graydon away.

"And yet—no, I can't believe that he would be so unjust," she cried aloud.

The insinuations pointed at him as well as at herself. If he were sensitive, he might well be inclined to think twice before he continued his acquaintance with her. But this timidity did not consort well with the opinion she had formed of his character.

Then came a letter from the editor of the magazine in which her efforts had appeared. He wanted some more stories from her pen. His letter enclosed two others. Both were from publishers. They wrote intimating their desire to see any novel she may have written, and offering very favourable terms.

How was it she was suddenly run after? At first she was conscious of a glow of elation; then followed incredulity, for she knew perfectly well

that these efforts of hers, though they might possess freshness, were certainly somewhat crude. The reason dawned upon her. She had become "a notorious woman."

She felt a sense of humiliation. Not for worlds would she pander to the morbid curiosity of novel readers and stimulate their jaded appetites.

"They want to read my books simply because I'm the 'Woman of the Eyes.' Well, they'll be disappointed," was her comment.

She threw the letters aside. She had no inclination to answer them. Moreover, had she been disposed to accept the flattering offers, she could hardly have done so, for she had nothing ready, and she was in no mood to write. Then the fear of a second visit from her husband overcame everything else, and she called on the house agent.

"I am going to Brighton," said she, "for a few weeks. In the meantime, perhaps, you had better take charge of the house. I will let you know when I return. Most likely I shall keep on the place for another quarter."

A young man with reddish hair and a self-satisfied smile received the key, and asked for her address in Brighton in case he might want to communicate with her.

"I will let you know. I've not quite made up my mind where I shall stay."

Then she hesitated, and the young man with the reddish hair looked at her admiringly, a tribute to her charms of which she was wholly unconscious.

She was considering whether she should leave any instructions supposing her husband should call. She decided she would not. To tell this

young man that if anyone made inquiries concerning her no information was to be given, would but excite curiosity. Better trust to chance, which sometimes ordered things better than the most careful planning and deliberate caution. As a matter of fact, she did not intend to go to Brighton. She only said this to throw dust in the eyes of anyone who might enquire after her.

Her next call was at Uxbridge railway station to arrange for her luggage to be sent for, and while she was doing so, a train from London came in, and from it descended a young woman, quietly dressed, small in size, pretty face, round, smooth, dreamy-eyed, and with an air of demure yet pert assurance which showed that she had long been in the habit of taking care of herself.

She passed through the booking-office as Alicia was talking to the luggage porter, and the name "Vine Cottage" caught the sharp ears of the young lady from London. She paused, the eyes as sharp as her ears rested on Alicia, and she loitered, apparently to study the time-table.

Then she turned and went out, and when outside the station, pulled a copy of the *Scorpion* from her wrist-bag.

"My word," ejaculated the young lady, "it's the very identical! What's the game? I guess *my* gent's sweet on the girl, and that he's jealous of the good-looking boy who was snap-shotted with her."

By "my gent" the young lady meant Douglas, who had taken her into his employ, and he could hardly have selected a better spy than Miss Jane Bassett. Jane was born to intrigue and to fool.

She was congratulating herself that she had been saved a great deal of trouble by lighting upon Miss Montrose, when she heard the latter approaching, and she had just time to thrust the *Scorpion* into her bag.

Alicia came out of the station and walked past Miss Bassett without taking any notice of her. Then the two continued at about the same distance apart, the London young lady accommodating her step exactly to that of Alicia, so that the latter could be easily kept in view and yet not suspect she was being followed.

Wherever Alicia went so went Miss Bassett. Finally Vine Cottage was reached, and the picturesque little retreat became quite an object of interest to the black eyes with the long silken lashes. No longer were they dreamy and demure. Miss Jane Bassett kept this especial aspect for the men-folk, save when they annoyed her, and they could then flash in a very decided fashion.

Skirting the road which bordered Vine Cottage, and on the opposite side, was a plantation through which ran a public path. On each side were thickets of bramble, hawthorn, holly, wild roses, and honeysuckle, and Miss Bassett, straying from the path, found she could watch the cottage without herself being seen.

Half an hour went by and nothing happened. Then she caught sight of a young man evidently in weak health. He was walking very slowly and was leaning heavily on his stick. This was a welcome change from the monotony of which Miss Bassett was becoming rather tired. The little lady had always eyes for men, particularly when they

were young and good-looking, and this man was both.

"Looks a swell," thought Miss Bassett, who had a keen perception of differences in the male sex. "Wears a silk topper in town, I'll wager. Awful bad, though, he seems."

The young lady was always open to a flirtation and she was half tempted to catch her dress in a bramble or pretend fright at an imaginary snake in the hope of enlisting the services of the handsome young man; but when she saw how feeble he appeared to be, she abandoned the idea, for though the hedge was not high it was a sufficient barrier to a man who had apparently just recovered from an illness.

Besides, Miss Bassett was not in the least sympathetic; indeed, she was intensely selfish, and hated people who were ill, especially men. Her interest in the stranger accordingly waned, only to be revived when she saw him open the little wicket-gate and make his way up the path to Vine Cottage.

"He's going to see Miss Montrose," said the little spy. "What for, I wonder? I wish I was a mouse in the corner to hear what they've got to talk about."

Anyhow, she made up for her inability to hear by her sharpness of vision. She parted the branches and peered through. It was so still she could hear the bell ring. The caller was fidgety and impatient, for while waiting he tapped his stick against the step. There was no response, and he rang again. Still more impatience.

As Miss Bassett had watched Alicia into the cottage she knew the lady was at home, and this little

fact gave a zest to her occupation. Another thing she saw to her infinite enjoyment. The curtain of one of the upper windows was swiftly drawn back, and a face appeared for a moment. It was quite possible to see the visitor from this window. By this time the latter had turned his back to the door, and the young lady's sharp eyes saw him biting his lips, and the look of disappointment in his eyes.

"My gracious, what a lark! She either doesn't want to see him, or she's making herself extra beautiful before she opens the door."

The cottage stood in the centre of a large garden, and the young man, after hesitating, came from under the porch and took half a dozen steps along the path leading to the back of the house. Then he stopped, was evidently in doubt what to do, and returned to the door. The meaning of this was perfectly clear to Miss Bassett.

"He thinks she's in the garden, but doesn't know whether she might not think him cheeky if he went to look for her," was the young lady's conclusion.

For the third time his ringing of the bell was unavailing. He wheeled round abruptly, and walked as quickly as his weakness would allow him down the garden-path. Jane Bassett could now see his face distinctly. She easily read the meaning of its expression—bitter disappointment, dejection, almost despair. Instantly her eyes went up to the window where she had already seen the blind drawn. Once more it was pulled gently aside.

Eric Graydon—for it was he—lingered for a

brief space when he reached the road, and once he looked back at the house. But he saw nothing. He went away, walking more slowly than ever.

Five minutes afterwards came a railway-porter wheeling a barrow. He rang the bell, and this time the door was opened quickly enough. Miss Bassett saw a big box and portmanteau brought out and taken away. Shortly after came Alicia Montrose herself, and took the road to the railway station.

Then Jenny Bassett stole from her place of concealment and she also went to the station.

In the meantime Bert Douglas was at his wits' end how to get money to carry on his daring design. It was of vital importance that he should know all Alicia's movements, and Jenny Bassett promised to be exceedingly valuable--if he could only pay her. He had no hold over her as he had over Rookson, and he had discovered that Jenny was a young lady with a will of her own. She insisted upon something down before she commenced, and he had no alternative but to part with his last half sovereign.

He had made his arrangements with Miss Bassett the evening before, and while she was what she called "foxing" Alicia, Douglas, having got up very late, was shaving in front of a cracked old-fashioned mirror.

The poverty-stricken bed-sitting room, with its sloping roof and window looking upon a broad gutter protected by a parapet, was in keeping with the looking glass. Everything had the "second-hand" hall-mark written large upon it. The iron bedstead had a decrepit look; one of the castors

was off and its place supplied by a block of wood, and it was deficient in three of the brass knobs. The mahogany easy chair, upholstered in what was once called morocco leather, had lost an arm. The square of carpet was threadbare; the chest of drawers was of painted deal, the edges worn white; the washstand was rickety, and the water-jug cracked. The paper on the walls was of an indescribable hue, something between a dull drab and terra-cotta.

The outlook from the window, so much as the protecting parapet allowed one to see, was as depressing as the interior of the room—the sloping roofs and unlovely chimney-pots of Tavistock Place, once favoured by well-to-do city merchants, but now considerably sunk in its fortunes. The room in which Bert Douglas was pondering over his penniless condition was the fourth-floor back of a lodging house in that semi-circular row of houses once known—for its title is now changed—as Burton Crescent, of sinister memories.

To those who know, it is difficult to pass that gloomy retreat without thinking of the two murders there perpetrated—murders wholly unassociated with each other, committed at different dates yet strangely similar in their mystery—mysteries which remain unsolved to the present hour. No wonder the residents hope to bury the past with the defunct name.

Douglas had not willingly selected this ill-favoured locality. His tastes were naturally luxurious, and he would have much preferred a West End hotel or a furnished flat. But needs must when the devil drives, and the devil had

driven him to this shabby quarter of London. Yet the place had its advantages. The room was cheap, it was within easy walking-distance of the great railway-stations of the northern lines, it was near the main highways of London, and it was in the very heart of the nomadic quarter which fringes the sedate respectability of Russell Square.

The nomadic characteristic gave it its charms in Douglas's eyes. Save the lodging-house keepers, a race quite by themselves, and inured by habit and occupation to the seamy side of life, the population was a floating one, and always coming and going. Nothing ever excited the surprise of the lodging-house keepers. You could indulge in any eccentricity you pleased, and no one took any notice. Seedy solitary men "did" for themselves, not in the sense of putting an end to their existence, but in regard to preparing their meals and making their beds; and no one cared. One who desired to lose his identity, to be lost to his friends, to conceal himself from inconvenient enquiries, could find no better place than this Bloomsbury Alsatia. Indeed, unless you wished it, you need not even be known to your landlady. You would probably interview her when you took the room, but provided you paid your rent punctually, it was more than likely you would never see her again excepting by accident. As for the landlord, he was a negligible quantity. No doubt he existed but he might as well have been a myth so far as individuality was concerned.

The "general" was the means of communication between the lodgers and the landlady. You paid your rent to the "general," you made your com-

plaints, if you had any, to the "general," and you looked to her for assistance in all cases of difficulty.

Douglas was shaving himself very carefully. There was no more fastidious man than he in regard to his toilet. Perhaps he was conscious how the very instant he lost the freshness, the bloom, the spick-and-span, the just-out-of-the-bandbox look of the well-groomed man, he regained his hang-dog, blackleg aspect.

So when he was in form his hair and moustache were always trim, his clothes were always well cut, without a speck on them; he was particular about the fit of his gloves, and his hat and boots were of the glossiest. His hat was a special cause of anxiety. Even when provided with an umbrella, at the slightest shower of rain he would dive into the nearest hostelry, there to remain till the shower was over. But even this did not content him. He was not satisfied until the hatter had brushed and ironed his cherished headgear and restored its pristine lustre. He well deserved his name of "Gentleman Fred"—when he was flush of money.

Of late he had not been able to indulge in this dandyism and his shabbiness chafed him. He was only really at ease when well-dressed. Society he did not care about. His fancy was for lounging at West End buffets, treating his friends and hangers-on in lordly fashion, if he were in funds, and being treated if he were not. But neither the one pleasure nor the other had he known for many weeks. Things had gone wrong with him, and whether he liked it or not he had been driven into crooked ways. It was not the first time. His offence which brought the law upon him at the

moment of his marriage, was forgery. At Dartmoor he had made Rookson's acquaintance, and he had learned a good deal about the "grafts" of other shady individuals who moved in the seamy side of life. Rookson was a "magsman," otherwise a begging-letter writer, and he had come to grief through imitating too cleverly the signatures of more than one well-known person. Unlike Rookson, Douglas was an amateur, but like most amateurs he was equal to a *tour de force* which few professionals would think of attempting.

While pondering over what he should do to get money, he wiped the razor, and at the sight of the bright, keen blade something threw him into a state of nervous horror. He raised his eyes and saw facing him a man, white, haggard, the lips dry and drawn, parted slightly and just showing the white, even, gleaming teeth, the eyes wild, dilated, terror-stricken.

It was himself—his image in the mirror!

He sank back in the chair, and mopped his damp forehead. For a few moments he was buried in a sort of lethargy. His hands were grasping his temples and covering his eyes. The paroxysm passed. He rose to his feet, staggering somewhat, as though his nerves had had a shock, but his look of terror gone.

"I must get used to this—I *shall* get used to it" he muttered fiercely. "I've nothing to fear, and why should I be such a fool as to be frightened at my own thoughts. If Rookson does his work well I shall be rolling in money before long."

He went on with his toilet. The last words he had uttered seemed to dwell in his memory.

"I'll have Alicia as well as the money," he suddenly burst out, his dark face flushing. "Why shouldn't I? She's my wife. She belongs to me. I think I made that clear to her."

He laughed a hard, metallic laugh, and his eyes gleamed. He repeated his words over and over again.

It took him some time to dress, and he spent some minutes in smoothing his hat. At last everything was to his satisfaction, and he sallied forth, not quite the dandy of former days, but with a suggestion of having made the best of his shabbiness. The glossy hat which he always managed to secure, no matter how low were his finances, did not consort well with his threadbare coat and whitened seams.

He walked to Gower Street, took the train to Paddington, and sauntered into the Great Western terminus. His object was a degrading one, but he could not help himself. He had no money; and money he must have if he meant to play the game properly. To descend to the level of a common "hook"—in other words, a pickpocket—was repugnant; but there was no help for it.

A main-line train was about to start. The platform was a scene of confusion—passengers hurriedly searching for seats, others bidding adieus to their friends, bawling porters wheeling luggage, screaming newspaper-boys, adding to the din. A crowd of well-dressed people were clustered round the door of a first-class compartment, among them a couple of ladies

Douglas took stock of these for a few moments; then, as a porter approached, wheeling a trolley

perilously close to the group, he, as if by accident, got in front of the trolley, brushed close to one of the ladies, lifted his hat, apologised, and disappeared. When he was again seen he was at the dark part of the station at the rear of the train, throwing something on to the line.

"Three quid and a fiver," he muttered. "Not bad."

What he had thrown on the line was a lady's purse.

The movements of the skilled "hook" are like lightening. Swiftness in pocket-picking is of vital importance. The whole business from the time Douglas spotted his victim to flinging away the purse did not take three minutes.

He hurried into the booking-office and changed one of the sovereigns, purchasing a ticket for Southall—not that he wanted to go there, but he required a legitimate object for loitering about the station. Then he slid the five-pound note into an envelope, which he had brought with him ready stamped, addressed to himself at Burton Crescent, posted it, and boldly went back to the station. This time it was the arrival platform he selected for his hunting ground. When the train arrived he mingled with the crowd, keeping his eyes fixed on the lady passengers, especially if they looked at all countrified.

Luck befriended him again. He secured a gold-mounted *portemonnaie*, the contents of which he emptied into his pocket without looking to see what his plunder was worth. A big hulking fellow was standing near him gaping and confused. It was probably his first visit to the Metropolis. He

looked like a gamekeeper, and had on a capacious well-worn velveteen coat with big pockets as gaping as his mouth.

With a deft motion of his hand Douglas dropped the empty *portemonnaie* into one of the pockets of the velveteen coat, and glided away. In pocket-picking the whole essence of the business so far as safety is concerned consists of the rapid disposal of the receptacle. One sovereign and one half-crown is the same as another, and cannot be identified; not so a purse.

As a rule the pickpocket has a confederate, and Douglas had often worked in partnership with Rookson, who "covered" his movements and whose hand was ready for the spoil, with which he instantly disappeared; so that if by chance the victim suspected the man who really picked his pocket, he would have no proof. But to-day Douglas had to work singlehanded, and that he had brought off two *coups* successfully was a tribute to his skill as a "hook."

He did not wait to see if his manœuvre had any awkward consequences for the gamekeeper, but hurried out and dived into Praed Street Station, and here booked first class to Queen's Road. There was no one else in the carriage, and he could count up his gains without observation. Including his first haul, he was richer by some fifteen pounds than when he left Burton Crescent.

"If all goes well, this ought to last me until the master stroke comes off," he mused. "And yet scarcely. My expenses are terribly heavy just now. Let me see! There's Rookson's keep and lodging. Well, thanks to the fright I gave him

over Shagford he won't go on the loose. He can't even run up a score at the nearest pub. He'll have to pay ready money, and he won't have much of that if I can help it. Then there's Jenny Bassett—pretty Jenny Bassett—Rookson's girl!"

A coarse, disagreeable smile wreathed his lips, and he leant back in his seat. On entering the carriage he had removed his beloved hat, and he now stroked the nap caressingly.

"Jenny and I are getting on very well," he continued, looking at the revived gloss. "We promise to be close pals. I thought we should from what Rookson said. Poor old Rookson! I suppose he's idiot enough to think she'll stick to him. Not built that way, if I know anything of women. Sort of girl who'd fool half-a-dozen fellows to the top of their bent, and make a fool of herself over the seventh. I guess I'm going to be that seventh. Won't be very expensive, I take it. More likely she'd rather draw out what money she's put away in the savings bank than ask me for any if I'm hard up. Then there are my own 'exes'. They're unknown quantities. Depends upon circumstances."

His reverie was interrupted by the train arriving at the station. He jumped out, and made his way into the Bayswater Road. Here he took a taxi to Piccadilly Circus. He was in no hurry, and might just as well have been economical and journeyed by motor-bus, but this was not Gentleman Fred's way. Directly he had money in his pocket he wanted to spend it, and the habit, always strong in him, had of late been irresistible.

He went into a well-known restaurant in Leicester Square and ordered a sumptuous lunch. Its

cost, including a bottle of Heidsieck with which he washed it down, reduced his capital by a little more than a sovereign. But he enjoyed himself. It reminded him of his old days in the City when he was hand in glove with the shady promoter who in his time of prosperity sent his daughter to Minerva House School—in itself an apparently unimportant circumstance, but fraught with the most terrible consequences to Alicia. But for the ambition of the financial mushroom, Alicia would never have known the man who embittered her life.

His thoughts were strangely mingled. Some were pleasant—like Henry Wainwright, the debased murderer, he was fond of dwelling on his past amours—others were disturbing, as could be seen by the lowering of the brows, the compression of the thin lips, and the twitching at the corners. Thanks, however, to repeated liqueurs, he fought the demon of unpleasant memories successfully and eventually settled down to working out the details of the daring *coup* by which he hoped to get hold of David Haggar's money.

CHAPTER XIII

A STRANGE REHEARSAL

DOUGLAS remained at the restaurant for another hour, his project simmering in his crafty brain, before setting out for Rookson's lodgings in the grimy *cul de sac* near King's Cross.

He found his friend, pipe in mouth, bending over a table strewn with sheets of foolscap paper, on each of which were some half-dozen lines of writing. At his elbow was a letter on ordinary notepaper headed Empress Hotel, the handwriting apparently identical with that on the foolscap.

"Well, you old wizard, how's the thing going?"

"Look for yourself. There's a dozen to choose from," said Rookson, with a wave of his pipe stem over the littered table. "Pick out which you think best."

Douglas took up the nearest. The writing commenced: "I, David Haggar, being of sound mind and body," and wound up with "signed in the presence of James Rookson and Jane Bassett." He looked at a second, a third, a fourth; they all purported to be David Haggar's will.

The next five minutes went by in silence. Douglas was carefully and anxiously comparing the writing on the foolscap with that of the letter. Jim Rookson smoked contemplatively.

"You've surpassed yourself, Jim," at last broke

out the critic. "They're all dashed good! Don't see a pin to choose between them. I leave the choice to you. You know a sight more about forgery than I do."

Rookson flipped one of the sheets with his pipe stem.

"That's the joker."

Douglas examined the copy indicated and approved Rookson's selection.

"By the way, Jim," said he, "there's a blank space on the letter—room enough for a fairly long postscript. I want you to add something. You've got the hang and the trick of the writing exactly."

"Well?" drawled Rookson drooping his eyelids.

"I'll tell you what to write when I've thought it out."

"Wait a moment; it can't be done for the same price."

"All right, I'll give you another fiver."

"Thanks; not good enough. I'm going to have a thousand—p'raps two—p'raps three—depends upon what your little game is, and I think I can pretty well guess."

Douglas forced a laugh. There was something very threatening in Rookson's face and manner, though his voice was unchanged.

At first sight Rookson looked harmless enough, but Douglas knew that his placid aspect was deceptive. In a burst of passion at Dartmoor Rookson once attacked a warder savagely, and was flogged in consequence. That flogging changed his nature. He was still a coward under ordinary circumstances, but given something which roused the latent devil within him, and in a second he could

work himself into a fit of ungovernable fury. At that moment there was that in his face which unpleasantly reminded Douglas of the Dartmoor outburst. Douglas had been a witness of the scene.

"Don't be an idiot!" growled Douglas. "I'll treat you fairly and squarely. What's the matter with you?"

"Where did you get that letter, Bert?"

"That's not your affair."

"Isn't it? I can use my eyes I suppose? The letter's dated July 15th. It's up against you isn't it that the old chap was done down on that day?"

Again Douglas laughed, but he could not conceal his uneasiness.

"I don't see what you're driving at."

"Then you must be an ass or you must take me for one. The queerness of the date didn't strike me at first, but it does now. Mind you I don't want to know anything. I'd rather *not* know. If I wasn't sure you could be as close as wax I wouldn't have touched the job. As it is I don't much like it and you'll have to make it worth my while."

"Why, of course, you old devil. I can't do without you, Jim. The thing's bound to come off all right, and when it does, I tell you straight, you won't need to do another stroke of work all your natural."

The letter which Douglas had given Rookson as a model for the writing of the will ran thus:

"My dear Alicia—My appeals to you have failed. I expected they would; for all that I determined I would have nothing to blame myself for. I did not want you to say afterwards: 'If you had asked me once more I would have yielded.' Perhaps

you are right in adhering to your de[illegible]on. If we had made up our differences somethi[illegible]ould have happened to make us fall out. Of co[illegible]se, I was a fool to think you would marry me, and a still greater fool to imagine you would love me. I never thought I could have loved anyone as I have loved you. That was the trouble. Think of it, Alicia, think of it and extend to me a little charity. I suppose you are capable of love though I never saw signs of it. I ask your pardon for my unjust suspicions, but I hungered for your love and could not endure to see you even friendly with other men. I suppose I was wrong. It was only natural you should come to hate me. I thought to purchase you with my money, and that for the sake of what I could lavish upon you, you would at least *pretend* some affection. I know other women have done this, and if their husbands choose to fool themselves, where was the harm? But you—you told me my proposal was a bargain and flung the word 'bargain' in my face over and over again. You maddened me. I did not want to be told the truth. I knew it, God help me. You thought because I was going down the hill of life, because I was misshapen, ugly, I could not dream of happiness. You were wrong. But I'll write no more. Perhaps I've already written too much. I mean to ask you as we go down to Southampton to alter your mind and return to Jamaica with me. If you refuse I shall send you this letter. Looking back I don't blame you for your coldness to me. Perhaps, knowing your character as I do now, it could not have been otherwise. The initial fault was mine. Probably this is the last time any communication will pass

between us. What may become of me I cannot say, nor do I much care. My only duty is to provide for you. I have not made up my mind how I shall do this, but if you let Perry and Latimer know your address they will write to you in case anything should happen to me. David Haggar."

Evidently Haggar had come to the conclusion that a marriage with Alicia was hopeless. The personal obstacles to success—his twisted body, his repellant face, his grating, snarling voice, his harsh manner—were too formidable to be overcome.

Rookson remaining silent Douglas took up the letter and read it through carefully. He was meditating over the postscript he proposed to add. It was of vital importance that it should not clash with what David Haggar had written. It was also indispensable that there should not be the least friction between him and Rookson, and he wondered how much the expert would want.

He began to write and after several corrections was satisfied and pushed the slip of paper across the table.

"There you are, Jim. You can set to work as soon as you like."

Rookson glanced at the slip then looking Douglas full in the eyes placed it within the letter, folded up both, and thrust them in his pocket. Douglas sprang to his feet and in a voice of suppressed fury hissed:

"Is this a challenge?"

"It's what you like. I take it you can't do without the postscript, and I'm willing to write it, but it must be on my own terms. And they'll depend entirely upon what you'll make out of the

business. I'm willing to do a speculative deal and stand the racket of the thing turning out trumps. What about ten per cent. on your net profits?"

"Yes, I agree to that," rejoined Douglas, after pretending to consider the proposal. As a matter of fact he would have agreed to anything, for the proposal was one thing and its fulfilment another.

"That's a bargain. Shake."

The two clasped hands and Rookson drew from his pocket the letter and the slip on which the postscript was written. He read through the latter, which ran thus:

"P.S. I have altered my mind. I have decided to make my will. It is signed and properly attested and in the event of your adhering to your resolution I shall post the document to Perry and Latimer when I reach Southampton."

Rookson's angry mood had passed, and his little pig-like eyes twinkled

"That's doosid smart, Bert. I begin to twig the milk in the cokernut. You're going to make up to the handsome girl with the eyes, and that's why you've cleared the other chap out of the way."

"You've hit it first time, Jimmy. Now that you know, get on with the postscript. When will you have it done?"

"It'll want some doing. I'll have to match the ink exactly, and I shall have to be jolly careful It it isn't just so, the slightest difference between my fist and the old chap's'll be spotted in two twos, with the letter above to compare with."

"All right. Don't spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar. Sign the will you've selected, as witness

you know, and I'll take it to Jenny for her to sign as well "

" You've found her, then ? " said Rookson looking up quickly.

" Yes, she's in the situation you told me about," returned Douglas with affected carelessness.

" Ah, and what did you think of the little woman ? "

" I didn't take much notice of her. She was willing to do what I wanted, and that was enough for me."

Rookson's eyes never left Douglas's face while he was uttering these words. Rookson knew Douglas's attitude generally towards women, and his suspicions were aroused. As for Douglas scarcely looking at a pretty girl, it was an obvious lie.

The fact was Rookson was " sweet " upon Jenny Bassett and he repented having mentioned her to Douglas. He determined to see Jenny as soon as he could move about with freedom and warn her against his pal

Rookson signed the forged will and handed it to Douglas, who went away with it to his lodgings. Here a telegram was waiting him. He tore it open and read

" Am coming to town. Important information Meet me at Charing Cross Post Office to-night at nine. J.B "

" Back so soon," muttered Douglas, frowning " What does that mean ? "

Half-past eight had just struck. It was not worth while ascending to his room : he turned about and hastened to meet Jenny A cold drizzle was falling

and on arriving at Charing Cross he took refuge under the shelter in front of the post-office. At five minutes past nine there tripped along a neat, trim little figure, who smiled impudently at him from beneath her umbrella.

"You had my telegram, then?" said she.

"Of course, or I shouldn't have been here. What's up? How is it you're back so soon?"

"Aren't you glad to see me?" said Miss Bassett, tossing her head.

"Of course I am, you little goose. Come and have a glass of wine, and tell me what you've been doing."

They went into the saloon bar of a neighbouring hostelry, and Douglas repeated his question—what had brought her back.

"You said I was to watch the lady at Vine Cottage, and follow her wherever she went, and so I've followed her to London. Between you and me, chappie, it looks as if she'd left Vine Cottage for good. Brought with her one of those big Saratoga trunks, and she's put up in one of the streets over yonder—I don't know the name of the street, but I can show you the house."

Jenny jerked her head in the direction of Charing Cross station.

This was news indeed, and yet not wholly unexpected. Douglas had made up his mind that Alicia would not remain long at Moreden, but he did not think she would be so prompt in her movements.

Jenny was as good as her words. She took Douglas to the hotel which she had seen Alicia enter. It was about half-way down Craven Street. Then

they returned to the Strand and walked westwards.

"What has the lady got to do with you?" asked Jenny, as they were strolling down the Haymarket.

"Nothing. I'm employed by somebody interested in her and he's sparing no expense, so I can afford to pay you well. I hope you like the work."

"Suits me down to the ground, dear boy. A jolly sight better than what I've been doing lately. By the way, I suppose you want me to tell you everything I saw."

"Of course I do."

"Well, then, soon after I began watching the cottage a young gent—quite a toff—looking awful bad, and walking with a stick, rang the bell, and Miss Montrose let him ring. Yet she was at home all the while."

Douglas made no comment. He merely asked Jenny to describe Alicia's visitor, which she did with considerable minuteness.

"You'll made a splendid lady 'tec, Jenny," said Douglas, patting her shoulder. "There's something else I can put you on to, but we can't talk about it here. Let's go to the Café Monico and have a feed."

The suggestion was quite to Jenny's taste. She always felt on good terms with herself and quite the lady when in a "swell" restaurant, sitting on a velvet couch and admiring her reflection in the mirrors around her.

Douglas said little, but smoked meditatively, while the little woman was enjoying her cutlets and chips, and her bottle of Guinness, and when she had finished and was puffing at a cigarette, he drew a sheet of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and

placing the lower part before Jenny, handed her a fountain pen.

"All I want you to do my dear is to write your name underneath that one."

Jenny glanced at the name and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"James Rookson! My word! Why *I* know a James Rookson. He used to be a waiter at the Empress when I was there."

"Exactly. It's the same man. Between ourselves he told me about you, and that's how I came to seek you out. I haven't mentioned that I called at Eaton Square and found you had gone. It was the footman there who put me on your track."

Jenny did not look over-pleased.

"Then I wish he hadn't. I hate people nosing about me. What on earth did you want with me?"

"To put money in your pocket, sweetheart, of course."

"Ask me another. You had something in your mind beside that, I'll bet."

"Well, you're not far out, and the odd thing is that no other woman in the world would suit me. I'll let you know more presently, but you may take my word for it that whatever you do for me will be well paid for. You've seen a proof of that already haven't you?"

"Oh, that's all right enough, but where do I come in? I mean what do you want me to do?"

"You shall know if you'll only have a little patience."

But Jenny was not the lady to be talked into a good humour in a minute.

"Well I don't like being mixed up with Jimmie

Rookson. I never cared much for him at the best of times, and I care less for him now. It's not in your favour, chappie, that you know Jimmie."

Douglas was not prepared for Jenny's hostility. His scheme demanded at least that his principal instruments should be in harmony with each other.

"What's your grievance against Rookson?"

"Oh, he was always making stupid love to me at the Empress. He never would leave me alone."

"That's no crime," rejoined Douglas laughingly. "It's only natural he should make love to you. You're just the girl, you know, to make any fellow spooney. I've taken a fancy to you myself."

"What nonsense," retorted Jenny, but looking a little mollified notwithstanding.

"It's not nonsense at all. Look here, little woman, are you afraid of Jim Rookson?"

"Afraid? *Me* afraid of Jimmie? No fear."

"Good; then don't you bother about him. *I'm* going to look after you. If I weren't sure you were jolly cute I shouldn't take you into my confidence as I mean to do. Look here, girlie, we're in for a big thing, but to make it go smoothly you'll have to run your horses with Jimmie. Now I'm going to let you into a secret, but I wouldn't breathe a syllable of it to you unless I thought I could trust you. Shall I tell you why?"

"If you like. *I* don't care."

"I *do* care. I've taken a great fancy to you and I don't see why we shouldn't be close pals."

This was said in the lowest of whispers and with a look of mingled languor and fire which Douglas could well put on when the woman he was talking to sufficiently interested him.

"You know best about that."

Jenny Bassett was softening. She had nothing to lose and, possibly, something to gain by sticking to the man who had taken her from a precarious life, which meant, among other things, a perpetual warfare with extortionate and bullying landladies, and a kind of nomadic existence when things were "rocky." Douglas certainly had treated her generously, and she was not indisposed to be sentimental towards him. Loneliness amid a whirl of garish gaiety, at times was very terrible, and a partnership in something would relieve the monotony of life.

"What I mean is that I don't want to be always talking business with you. The point is do you like me?"

"Why, of course—just a little bit—I'm not going to say how much," said Jenny coquettishly.

"You needn't. I can find it out for myself. I can see we're going to be the best of chums."

Douglas was in earnest. There was something about Jenny Bassett which appealed to him—which he felt was akin to his own nature. He was certain he could mould her as he wanted to. Those sleepy eyes had occasionally a suggestive flash in them which revealed the wicked depths below.

"Now, please, attention! Before you sign this paper as I told you—just below Jim Rookson's name—I want you to imagine for a moment that I'm Jim."

"Gracious; whatever for? I don't want to imagine anything of the kind. You *are* horrid."

"Wait a moment till I've explained. This paper is the will of a man who stayed at the Empress

Hotel at the time when you and Rookson were in service there. Now Rookson—don't forget I'm Rookson, please—comes to you one afternoon—you'll remember the afternoon, because it was stormy and wet and cold, though the month was July—and asks you to witness the signature of the gentleman in number—by the way we must have the number of the gentleman's room. You can tell me that, can't you ?"

"How can I when I don't know who the gentleman was."

"I'll describe him to you. He stayed at the Empress quite three months—a little dried-up, yellow-skinned man, with a squeaky voice. He left the hotel to go back to the place he came from, Jamaica."

"You don't mean the poor old chap who was murdered do you ?" said Jenny in a hushed voice.

"Yes I do."

"Oh . . . . . ."

"That's another fact that'll help you to fix him in your mind. Now then, what was the number of his room ?"

"It was 91. We used to call it the unlucky room—seven times thirteen, you know."

"Very well. Now on the 15th of July last—keep that date well in your mind, my dear—you went with Rookson into this gentleman's room for the purpose I've mentioned. The old chap signs first. Watch. This is his signature—I'm only pretending to write it ; you'll observe that it's already written."

Douglas moved his pen over the characters without, however, touching the paper. Jenny watched him, with eyes full of curiosity, and her

lips spelt the name as he made believe to write it.

"David Haggar—yes, that was his name," said she.

"Keep your eyes on what I'm doing. I'm signing now as James Rookson."

He went over Rookson's signature exactly as he had gone over David Haggar's.

"You saw me do that didn't you?"

"Why, certainly. I'm not blind."

"Not you, darling. Now the point is that you must fancy you've seen Rookson sign. Take the pen in your pretty little fingers and don't ink them. Write your name just below Rookson's and don't forget that you've done it in his presence. I could have worked it so that he and you signed this paper together, and then there'd have been no necessity for me to go through this performance so far as he's concerned, but for the moment Jim's obliged to lie low."

"What's he been up to? He told me he was going to run straight for my sake. I said he was a fool if he couldn't find a better reason than that. I'm glad though you haven't asked me to see him. I'm not gone on him. But that's nothing. What I'd like to know is, what's the meaning of this galanty show?"

"It's merely a rehearsal sweetheart. I'll explain. For a will to be properly executed—that's the legal term—the person making it must not only sign it in the presence of two witnesses, but each witness must also sign his or her name in the presence of the other. Have I made that clear?"

"Yes. I've heard of that rigmarole before. But I don't see that I've done it. Mr. Haggar's dead. How can I say I saw him sign?"

"Because, my dear, for this occasion only I happen to be Mr. Haggar."

Jenny stared as well she might. Then she gave an incredulous little laugh, and her small, twinkling eyes blazed angrily for a moment.

"You're having a fine old game with me. I wish you wouldn't talk in silly riddles. I hate fooling, and about a dead man, too."

"There's not the least bit of fooling, my lovely Jenny, as you'll say, when I hand you a £100 or so, for just putting your name to a piece of paper. All you have to do is to imagine that I'm Haggar and that you saw me sign. Do you understand?"

"Oh *I* understand well enough. But what's it going to lead to?"

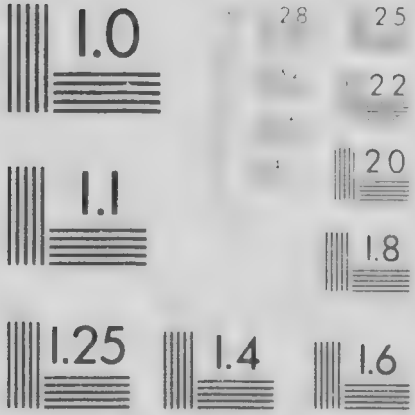
"The £100 I told you of—perhaps more. What you've got to do is to picture how Haggar signed the will in the presence of you and Rookson. It's easy enough to imagine the whole thing. The first point is that it took place in room 91. You can describe how Mr. Haggar was sitting at the table with the will before him and the pen and ink ready to hand. Of course he said something to you when you entered the room."

"What did he say?" Jenny asked. "It ought to be natural. While you're inventing you'd better invent that too."

Douglas smiled with grim satisfaction. He could see that Jenny Bassett was not at all frightened at the daring scheme in which she was to figure. He reflected for a moment:

"Mr. Haggar would probably say something like this: 'Do you write a pretty good hand?' You might answer: 'I've been told so, sir.' Then you'd

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART



describe how he took up the pen and asked you to look at him while he wrote his name on a paper that was lying on the table. He told Rookson to do the same thing and then, when he'd finished, Rookson signed and you followed. Mr. Haggar thanked you, gave each of you half-a-crown a piece and you went away."

"That's easy and sounds like a bit out of a book. There's only one thing you might put right," and Jenny's eyes twinkled roguishly.

"What's that?"

"I didn't have no half-crown, you know. You can hand it over now if you like, Mr. *Haggar!*"

Douglas laughed and pushed the coin towards the young lady.

"You ought to remember everything I've told you after that. The half-crown's real enough, anyway."

"You bet."

"Now recollect this—it's very important. You may be asked to tell your story by a lawyer and you'll have to be ready with your answers to his questions."

"You needn't be afraid. What about Rookson? Will he be asked questions, too?"

"Certainly."

"Then you'd better make sure he tells the same story as me. I don't want to be bowled out by his blundering. He's cunning, but he's likely to overdo things."

"Don't you worry about Jim Rookson. I'll see that he's all right."

Then Jenny's curiosity asserted itself. She

wanted to know what the thing was which Douglas was so anxious should come off right.

Douglas was silent for a minute or so. He was wondering how much of his plan he could venture to tell his sharp-witted confederate. He had been very careful not to let her see what the will contained. As she was in ignorance he could concoct any story he liked.

"It's just this, Jenny. Mr. Haggar, having died before he signed his will, I've done it for him to make the document a legal one, and enable the person to whom he left all his money to benefit. Now the man who's employing me can afford to be liberal to those who've helped him and that's where you and I come in."

"I see the idea, but you said a 'man.' Isn't there a woman in it too? There generally is. What about the madam I've been foxing at Moreden?"

"She's the person Haggar's left his money to and this paper is going to put her in possession of his fortune. At present she knows nothing about it but my employer does. He's in love with Miss Montrose and he not only wants to marry her but her money too. That's why he's anxious not to lose sight of her. There's another reason why he's engaged me to watch her. Every other Johnnie must be kept off the grass. Do you see?"

"Of course I do now you've told me. Was that the man I saw call at Vine Cottage?"

"As I didn't see the man myself I can't tell you."

"Well, but I told you what he was like? I suppose you know the man you're working for."

"No. I had the job through a friend of his.

You see he's got to be dashed careful. His hand mustn't be seen anywhere."

"H'm," rejoined Jenny doubtfully. "Seems to me there's too many in the game. Makes it a bit risky doesn't it?"

"You don't stand any risk, sweetheart, anyhow. All your share in the business is that I asked you to sign a paper and you did it. You know nothing more. In the meantime here's a little oof to go on with."

He slipped a couple of sovereigns into her hand and Jenny's scruples vanished. She'd seen a sweet hat in a milliner's shop and for a whole week she had sighed for it in vain. It was now within her reach.

"We must have another rehearsal of this little play," were Douglas's parting words. "I want you to be quite perfect. It wouldn't be a bad notion to have a dress rehearsal with all the strength of the company, in other words with you and Rookson together. Yes I must bring that off when I'm ready for the curtain to draw up."

"I'd rather not see Jimmie."

"I know you wouldn't and I don't particularly desire it but there's no other way. And, by the way my dear, when you do see our friend don't put his back up. I suppose you can kid him that you don't bear him any ill will?"

"Oh, I can do *that*."

"Good."

"When shall I see you again?" said Jenny as they stood at the door of the restaurant

"To-morrow perhaps. But I'll write."

He got into a taxi waved his hand through the window to Jenny and was borne away.

CHAPTER XIV

SCOTLAND YARD AT WORK.

THE surgeon looked grave. He had just taken his cool sensitive fingers from Graydon's wrist."

"What have you been doing? Yesterday your pulse was normal, and the temperature was about right, and now—well you've certainly had a set back. I said you might go out for a quarter of an hour's easy stroll and nurse tells me you did not return for a couple of hours. What's the use of my doing my best for you if you won't carry out my instructions. It's not fair to me."

"I'm awfully sorry, doctor. You're quite right, I admit I overdid it yesterday but there were reasons. Unluckily I failed in what I wanted to do and that rather depressed me."

"Well you must keep yourself very quiet. I hardly know whether I'm justified in letting you see your father."

"What, is he here?"

"Yes, he's now waiting my permission to enter the ward. Now mind, if I allow him to see you don't get excited."

"I don't think that will happen. It's my father who generally provides the excitement."

The surgeon smiled and walked away.

Of course, directly Eric recovered consciousness his identity was made known and duly chronicled in the papers. Sir George Graydon was in Paris

when the intelligence reached him and he came to London at once. He greeted his son with a warmth he rarely showed. In his heart he was very fond of the young man.

"My dear boy! I'm glad to find you're up and that yesterday you were able to go out. Nurse tells me you're very weak. Walked too far she says. You mustn't do it again—what I mean is, go gently. Now, are you being looked after properly in this place?"

"Certainly. I couldn't have better attention."

"That's all right as far as it goes but—well I'll give you my ideas on that point later on. First of all what's the meaning of this extraordinary business?"

"What does it mean? Nothing more than a commonplace assault and robbery. Anyhow the scamps cleaned me out."

"That's so, no doubt; but it doesn't answer my question. What I mean to say is how came you down here?"

"The country's said to be very pretty."

"Now pray don't evade the point. If you said golf or partridge shooting I might believe you, but 'pretty country'—it wont do."

"It'll have to do, sir. I've nothing else to say."

Sir George stared at his son and did not pursue this line of examination.

"We'll waive that question for a moment and go to another point. On my way here I made it my business to call at the police station and the inspector told me all they found out. It doesn't tally with your story."

"I didn't know I'd told any story."

"Exactly and that's what so aggravating. What on earth am I to say to Hargrave? He's very anxious about you and putting aside the present unfortunate affair for which of course you're not responsible I'm bound to tell you he's not impressed by your energy."

"Well I'm not impressed by it myself."

"Glad you own that anyhow. What you must do when you're strong enough is work—work. I don't want to reproach you but you must admit that if you'd done as I told you, gone down to Slumpington and nursed the constituency, this disaster wouldn't have happened. However, we must make the best of a bad job. What I mean is that you ought to get away from here. What does the doctor say about your leaving?"

"Ordered me not to go out for another week."

"Surely there can't be any objection to your being motored gently to town."

"I'm very comfortable here."

"I dare say; but that isn't the point. Hargrave doesn't like the notion of your being in a cottage hospital. It sounds so poverty stricken and the Slumpington people'll say that I'm mean, or can't afford the best advice. You must be take to Wilton Crescent as soon as possible and I'll call in Sir Roper Parker. Nothing like having a specialist."

"So that you may fling away a hundred guineas I suppose."

"I know these specialists open their mouths confoundedly wide, but as an advertisement it'll be worth every penny of the money. Can't you see that?"

"But what on earth have I to do with advertisements? I'm not a pill or a soap."

"It's just this. An election's a matter of business—absolutely, and advertisement's the soul of business. As a candidate you must keep yourself before the public. Now Sir Roper's at the very head of his profession—one of the King's surgeons and all that you know. The mere fact of his attending you is certain to be in the papers and so will your name. In one sense this unfortunate accident has its fortunate side. Hargrave spotted the point at once—absolutely. It'll make you talked about."

"I thought you were of opinion that I'd already had too much publicity," said Eric drily.

"Of a sort, yes, but that isn't what I meant. Look here, Hargrave's sent his directions to the Slumpington Conservative Club. They're giving a smoking concert or something of the kind, and the president's going to propose a vote of sympathy with you in the course of the evening."

"With musical honours?"

"Eh? Pray don't talk nonsense. I do wish you'd look at the thing seriously."

"I'm really doing my best but it's very difficult."

"Upon my word Eric you make me tired absolutely. There's no doubt about it we must get you to town as soon as possible. When you're at Wilton Crescent Hargrave will call upon you and have a chat over matters. We shall have to work very hard to counteract the unpleasant impression created by those spiteful articles in the *Scorpion*. Now the very best reply to its scurrilous attack

would be the announcement of your engagement to Miss Hargrave—absolutely the best."

"What! Do you really seriously suggest this?"

"My dear Eric pray allow me to finish. Don't forget you owe something to the party."

"What do I owe?"

"Really—really do let me speak. It was in your interest that I ran over to Paris. Hargrave and his wife and daughter were there and we had a long talk over you."

"A family council. How good of you all. Did Miss Hargrave take part in it?"

"Of course not. What do women know about politics?"

"I'm unable to say, but they talk as if they did—at least some of them do."

"Well—well we needn't go into *that* nonsense. The point is that Hargrave and I came to a complete understanding about you. The matter's gone past the negotiating stage. It's a *fay accomply* as the French say and we must commence the campaign in earnest. Hargrave says that a general election's much nearer than people think."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you but election or no election I'm clear on one matter, there'll be no engagement between me and Miss Hargrave. I hope nothing's been said to her to convey the impression that I've anything to do with this detestable bargaining."

"De—test—a—ble bar—gain—ing?"

"That was what I said. I'm quite sure that if the girl knew what her father and you have arranged, and if she imagined it was done with my consent, that she'd have a thorough contempt for me."

"H—m, h—m, I agree with you of course to a certain extent, that is if you don't care for the girl. But I've never heard you say a word against her."

"Why should I say anything? She's not very brilliant but she's amiable enough."

"And what more in Heaven's name do you want in a wife?"

"What's the use of discussing such a question. I don't know a more worrying subject. One of the pieces of advice the doctor has given me is that I mustn't worry."

"That's all very fine but what about the business that brought you down here? I didn't intend to say a word about your folly but you force me to. Do you know that the police have their own views of the matter? I learn from them that the inevitable woman has made her appearance."

"Made her appearance? What on earth do you mean?"

"Now don't excite yourself. The doctor warned me against that."

"Then the best way of not doing it, is to tell me straight out what the police think."

"No, they can do that for themselves. I believe you'll have a visit from a Scotland Yard man to-day. In the meantime make up your mind to wash your hands of the entanglement you've got into. Do you want me to say any more?"

"No I don't think I do. What you've told me makes me all the more determined to see the thing through."

"Then you're mad. 'Pon my word I'm not sure whether it isn't my duty to have the condition of your mind enquired into. I really believe it

would be in your own interests if you were put under restraint for a while."

"Thanks. Send your mad doctors by all means. I'll talk to them. Anyhow it's hardly fair to come down on me just now. Hadn't you better wait until I'm quite well?"

Sir George had been working himself up to one of his furies. Eric's remonstrance cooled him somewhat. At the same time he was not going to surrender without a final effort.

"I'm the last man—absolutely—in this world to wish to take an unfair advantage of anybody, and it shall be as you wish *but*, as your father, I appeal to you. Promise me not to see the woman or do anything in relation to her for a couple of months. Let things develop. We haven't heard the last of her and in common prudence you ought to keep out of any more complications. Do think of me—do think of your own reputation."

"I can't make any promises. Let things develop by all means and then we shall be better able to judge who's right and who's wrong."

"Very well, then you must take the consequences. Anyhow for the present I won't tell Hargrave anything. When you're yourself once more you may alter your mind."

Eric shook his head. He was glad when his father was gone. Rightly or wrongly Sir George had given him something to think about: but he had not much time for thinking. Half an hour after his father had departed he had another visitor—a man with an impassive face, an unemotional voice, and a somewhat impressive and suave

manner—Detective-Inspector Shagford of Scotland Yard.

"I'm glad you're better, Mr. Graydon," said the officer. "I should have called on you before but I was waiting for the doctors' permission. I hope we shall now have something to work upon, with your assistance."

"I don't see how I can help you."

"I'm not so sure about that. To begin with —did you see either of the fellows who attacked you?"

"No. They were too quick. They took me unawares. I notice you say 'either.' How do you know there were two?"

"We don't *know*, we only suspect. The footprints show that more than one was on the job, and it's very certain that a man who was not so very long ago discharged from Dartmoor came to Uxbridge in the very train which brought you. Here's his description and his photograph taken at Wormwood Scrubbs. Have you ever seen anyone resembling him?"

Graydon studied the photograph for a few seconds and handed it back to Shagford.

"Yes. I saw such a man at Winchester, and I've reason to believe not only that he followed me to London, but has been shadowing me since."

"For what purpose? Any idea?"

"Not the slightest."

"It's something to start with anyhow. I may tell you Mr. Graydon that what you say tallies with what we think. We're pretty sure that, though the rascals robbed you, robbery wasn't the main object. At the same time whoever did the

job understood his business thoroughly. Your pockets were emptied in proper professional style. This gives us a clue where to look for the fellows. I'm bound to say, however, that search in the most probable quarters hasn't yielded us anything yet."

The detective's manner became more grave.

"Now, Mr. Graydon, I'm going to put some purely personal questions. You mayn't like them and you may refuse to answer them, I can't help that. What took you to Moreden?"

"I prefer not to tell you. It concerns me and no one else."

"I beg your pardon—it concerns the police. However, you needn't trouble; I think I can supply the answer. You came to see Miss Montrose who's been living at Vine Cottage. I only wish we'd known it weeks ago. She gave us the slip after the inquest and we ought to be shadowing her at this very moment if we only knew where to find her. Can you assist us in any way?"

"No, and if I could I wouldn't. I'm certainly not going to drag her into this unpleasant business of mine. What has she to do with it?"

"That's precisely what the police are anxious to discover. According to the house agent, who appears to have been the last person she spoke to before leaving Moreden, her intention was to go to Brighton but we've not been able to trace her there."

"What makes you so anxious to find the lady?"

"Because she happens to be the only link between the police and the murderer of Mr. Haggar."

"In what way?" asked Graydon, though inwardly he was much disturbed

"How can we say yet? We're compelled to keep her in sight if we can."

"And what have you discovered concerning her?"

"Now really Mr. Graydon you can't expect us to reply to *that* question."

"No, I don't ask you to do that, but at least you can tell me whether you've found out anything to her discredit."

The detective paused before he answered.

"It's only fair to Miss Montrose to admit that we've discovered nothing definite. There are one or two blanks in her history we should like to fill up. I wc .'t say any more than that."

"Who's this man?" asked Graydon pointing to the Wormwood Scrubbs photograph

"He was convicted of forging begging letters in the names of well known persons. He gave his name as James Salmon. His record at Dartmoor's very bad. Of course, sooner or later we're bound to run him to earth."

"Do you associate the affair at Winchester with this business of mine?"

"I can't help thinking there's some connection. You say yourself that Salmon has been following you. Isn't it something more than a mere coincidence that he should come down by the same train with you, and that in the evening, two miles away and within a few minutes walk of Vine Cottage, you should have been attacked?"

"You say that according to the footprints there were two on the job. What of the other man? Have you found out anything about him?"

"No, unfortunately; yet it's pretty certain

Salmon expected someone from London, for he came back to the station to meet the train following yours, and was noticed loafing near the exit for the down line passengers."

"And did he meet anybody?"

"He wasn't seen to do so but that goes for nothing. These gentry know their way about too well to do anything to excite suspicion. One shady character by himself may mean little, but two—well, when that happens there's mischief afloat. Salmon no doubt met his pal some distance from the station."

Graydon could not associate Alicia with a begging letter writer who had done time. But the man whom he saw with Salmon at Winchester railway station was a different individual altogether. He had a certain carriage of figure which suggested that at some time he had mixed with good society. If Shagford had not let fall his mysterious and disquieting hints concerning Alicia he would have mentioned the Winchester incident, but he held his tongue. The matter touched Alicia too nearly.

"It isn't necessary to worry you any longer Mr. Graydon," said the detective rising. "I'm sorry you're not disposed to help us. I hope you'll turn the matter over in your mind and let us know the result. Good day. I trust you'll soon be about again."

CHAPTER XV

DOUGLAS BIDES HIS TIME

GRAYDON took the detective's advice, so far as turning things over in his mind was concerned, but could see only one road before him allegiance to Alicia. The result of his cogitations was to make him more determined than ever to champion her. Shagford's hints, while deepening the mystery, inflamed his ardour to see her righted; and he became so restless that at last the surgeon reluctantly gave consent to his repeated entreaties to be allowed to leave the hospital. As a matter of fact the surgeon was acting in concert with the police and had made out that he was worse than in reality was the case, so as to detain the patient until the Scotland Yard official could interview him.

But he was now free and he resolved not to heed Shagford's investigations but start on a line of his own. So once more he was at the gate of Vine Cottage. He walked up the narrow garden path and when within a couple of yards of the porch the door opened, and an ordinary-looking young man with reddish hair appeared. The two glared at each other enquiringly.

The mutual glare over Graydon was about to continue to the door when the young man asked what he wanted

"May I enquire what business it is of yours?" retorted Graydon.

"No business at all. I only wanted to save you trouble. There's no one living in the house."

"Has Miss Montrose left then?"

"She has and she hasn't. Anyhow she hasn't given up possession but whether she's coming back I can't tell you."

"Are you a friend of the lady?"

"No. Only the house-agent. I'm looking after the place while she's away."

"Do you happen to know where Miss Montrose has gone."

"She said something about Brighton, but I can't tell you for certain."

"Did she say when she was coming back?"

"No, she didn't, and I didn't ask her."

Graydon said no more. There was very little information to be got out of the young man with the reddish hair. Probably it was he who had told the detective that Alicia was at Brighton. Graydon tramped back to Uxbridge, and within a little more than an hour was at Perry and Latimer's.

But the lawyers could tell him nothing. They did not even know that Miss Montrose had gone to Brighton. She had not written to them, and they were under the impression she was still at Moreden.

That evening saw Eric Graydon at Brighton wandering up and down the King's Road, hoping to meet among the promenaders the woman he so ardently longed to meet. But in vain. After a fruitless search of the visitor's list the next day, he made a round of the principal hotels and, thinking Alicia might have taken another name, tried to describe her, but without any result.

Then he fell back upon his wanderings. He

clung to the hope that the parade and the piers were the most likely place to encounter her if she were at Brighton; and day after day for a whole week he paced the favourite resorts of the visitors. He was unsuccessful, but the continual exercise on the sea front completed his recovery. He returned to London invigorated, but intensely disappointed and disquieted. All his uneasy thoughts concerning Alicia returned in full force. He could not prevent himself from going over the old ground of suspicion—that she knew more about the Winchester Mystery than she choose to say. He recalled to memory her reticent manner, her disjointed phrases, and, most disturbing of all, her conflicting explanations concerning her strange photograph. In spite of these explanations the matter had not been cleared up satisfactorily.

His old anxiety on these points had died away after finding out she was living at Moreden, and especially when she gave her consent to his calling upon her, but it came back now, and was tinged with sinister forebodings which he could not dismiss from his mind. He regarded her strange disappearance without a word to the solicitors, as distinctly alarming.

Graydon was too unsettled to fix his brain upon anything in London. After the fresh air of the country the blue sky and the stimulating breezes, his room seemed stuffy, drear and sombre. But in London there are always the crowded streets, the well-lighted shops the endless study of life for the distracted mind to fly to, and when darkness approached Graydon found relief in these resources.

Meanwhile Alicia had buried herself, so she hoped,

at Poynter's Family Hotel, Craven Street, an establishment belonging to a class of hostelries once peculiar to London, but now gradually disappearing. These "family" hotels are situated in side streets, and, architecturally speaking, are utterly devoid of character. The windows are narrow and what little light they admit is obscured by curtains. The proprietors appear to think that gloom and heaviness give a "comfortable and homely aspect" to the rooms; wallpapers of obtrusive patterns, in dark crimson, claret, or sombre green, are much affected, probably because they do not show the dirt, and the early-Victorian furniture is solid, cumbrous and ugly. Sprawling steel engravings, mostly of Landseer's and Frith's depressing pictures, add to the general impression of dulness; there is nothing to read but newspapers, Bradshaw, the Post Office Directory, and a guide book to some obscure watering-place, got up to advertise a particular hotel. The atmosphere is always reminiscent of bygone meals, and in the dining-room the table cloth is rarely removed, owing to the uncertain habits of the people staying in the house—mostly from the country.

Poynter's depended upon its connection. It was a tradition with many of its customers that when they came to London they were bound to stay at Poynter's. The probability is that "improvements" in any shape or form would be strongly resented by these sticklers for old times.

Alicia had no particular object in going to Poynter's. She had never been there, and knew nothing about it beyond the fact that the Misses Linnington, of Minerva House, Eastbourne, where

she passed her long school life, used always to stay at Poynter's when they visited London, and invariably spoke of it as "most respectable," as no doubt it was.

Alicia did not intend to remain long at the moth-eaten establishment. Its general stodginess and its whiffy atmosphere were repellant, and, moreover, though the charges were moderate, they were more than she, with her limited income, could afford. Her idea was to take a bed-sitting room somewhere in the Western suburbs, and work quietly with her pen. Dogged industry, she decided, was the panacea for trouble.

She had many a weary tramp in Bayswater, in the neighbourhood of the Edgware Road, in Chelsea and West Kensington, and at last found something which she thought would suit her in Shepherd's Bush. Wherever she went, there also went the astute Jenny Bassett, who, at the end of every day, reported to Douglas what she had done.

All this time Alicia was ignorant that the man who had been assaulted and robbed near Vine Cottage was Eric Graydon. As already mentioned when his identity was established, the fact was recorded in the newspapers, but newspapers Alicia had purposely avoided. After the attack in the *Scorpion*, she was nervously sensitive in regard to anything that might be said about her; and especially so in connection with Graydon; and she confined her journalistic reading to the advertisements of apartments to let.

With Douglas, the reverse was the case. Not a line which appeared in the papers concerning Graydon escaped him. Of course, he recognised Eric in the

vivid description Jenny had given of the young "gent" she had seen call at Vine Cottage, and the knowledge that the man whom he looked upon as dangerous, was likely soon to be in evidence again, was, to him, extremely disquieting.

For a few days he did not go out, save to the nearest public newsroom, where he made diligent search of the morning and evening journals. He had a fear lest Graydon might have seen either himself or Rookson, though the probability was remote. Shagford's suspicion concerning Rookson was, however, the only thing which found its way into print, and before the week was over, Douglas came to the conclusion that he might move about with safety.

But Jimmie Rookson had still to be very cautious, and Douglas was emphatic in his injunction to the ex-waiter to "lie low," and as he took care to supply his partner with funds sufficient to pay for his board and lodging, beer and tobacco, Rookson was quite contented to loll in bed half the day, doze, smoke, and study the papers. Indeed, since the affair at Uxbridge had turned out to be not quite so serious as he feared, he did not care how long his lazy life to quote his own words: "nothing to do and somebody paying your exes for doing it," lasted

Jimmie said as much to Douglas, and chuckled as he said it.

"Oh, you're a confoundedly lucky bargee," retorted Douglas, "and I tell you it's a deucedly hard strain on me to keep the show running."

"How long will it run, eh? Time you took the next step, isn't it? You've settled the preliminaries, I guess."

"Pretty well, but I don't quite see my way clear yet."

"Of course not. You've got a nice kink to straighten out. By the way, where does young Graydon come in? You've never told me. Why don't you?"

"He comes in too much; that's why I wanted him out of the way. How the deuce can I make the running with the girl while he's hanging about. He's after her, or he wouldn't have gone down to Uxbridge—not but what I'm glad he did, as it put us on the right track."

"That's so, but what's going to happen now that he's out and about?"

"So long as he doesn't queer my pitch, I don't care what happens."

"And if he *does* queer it, what then?"

"Wait till the time comes, and I'll tell you."

"I hope you won't. I don't want to know. Look here, Bert, understand me once for all. I'm not taking any of your 'doing down' games. You dragged me into the Uxbridge job, but you don't catch me again. Get some of the 'boys' to help you next time. You look as if you were getting back into the old swagger set. Which is it—city or turf?"

Douglas had certainly improved in appearance. His morning-coat, cut in the American style, fitted him like a glove; his trousers had immaculate creases, he wore spats, a vest edging marked the opening of his tightly-buttoned coat, and you could almost see your face in his glossy hat.

"Not much chance in the city now-a-days, Jimmie. The good old times of 'wild cat' schemes

are over. The mugs fight shy of the Stock Exchange. The fact is, they've been bitten too often and nothing attracts 'em now. When I was a youngster in the office of an outside broker, where I learned a few useful dodges, gold mines were all the rage, and by jove, you could scoop in the oof by handfuls, but to-day the public turns up its nose at gold. Of course, there's a boomlet now and again—rubbers and oils and such like small fry—but the market's mostly for professionals. All the really taking gambles are knocked on the head, not excepting 'skill competitions.'"

"Ah. Ever knew anybody who won a prize—I mean a really big prize?"

"No, but I've known heaps who knew somebody who had a friend who knew somebody else who was lucky, and that's as far as most people have got, I believe. The advertising swindle's always on, but you want a good idea and you must have capital. The real draw is something with a gamble in it, and betting never dies. Just now I'm in with some Johnnies running an agency at Ostend to catch the flats here. I sold them a list of names of people who can't exist without betting. But for that, Jimmie, old man, you'd go short of baccy and other luxuries."

"Blest if you don't have the devil's own luck," grumbled Rookson enviously. "I was once promised a nice little sum if I could sneak a list from a bookie I know, but he was too fly. I guess that's how you got yours, Bert."

"You can guess what you like. The point now is that I'm anxious to get on with the Haggar campaign as soon as possible. Meanwhile, my

dear chap, you're on velvet. All you have to do is to eat, drink, smoke and dream of the gold that'll shower on you when I've pulled the thing off."

"Does that mean you've nothing more for me to do?"

"Practically it does. Of course, when the will's produced, you may be questioned about your signature, but I'll prime you with the proper story."

"Thanks. And what about Jenny?"

"She'll have to say the same thing, of course."

Rookson frowned and bit his nails.

"I'd like to see Jenny and have a talk with her about this business. It seems to me I'm as much a partner with her as I am with you."

"Of course you are, but I may tell you that she's already signed and that she's got her story by heart."

"Very well, then *her* story must be *my* story. I'll write to her."

"Don't do anything so idiotic. Nobody must know where you're living. Not even Jenny. Don't you see that?"

"Am I to stick in this beastly hole for ever?" Rookson suddenly bellowed.

Rookson's voice had all at once become harsh and strident, and the change from his usual smoothness—the deferential smoothness of the waiter, suggestive of self-effacement—was startling. The scene at Dartmoor came back vividly to Douglas's memory. Rookson looked now almost as he looked then.

The effect of prison life on certain temperaments is to produce a morbid mental excitement, which finds its outlet in "doing a burst." All prison

officials are acquainted with the phenomena more common among women than among men. Rookson's attack on the Dartmoor warder was due to causes for which he was hardly responsible, and his punishment had given to his nervous system a shock which showed itself now and again, often without seemingly adequate provocation. Such a mood would come upon him in a few seconds, and while he was under its influence he could not control himself.

Douglas was perfectly well aware of this, but he also knew his power over Rookson, and could generally bring him back to his normal condition. He did it by chaff and flattery.

"Stop here for ever? Not likely. But just think over the position. I admit this place is a sort of prison, but compare it with the real thing. Did you have chops and steaks at Wormwood Scrubbs or at Dartmoor? Did the 'screws' (prison warders) supply you with unlimited 'smout' (tobacco)? How much bottled beer had you during your three 'stretch' (years)? I guess you've never washed this room out or polished your tea kettle since you've been here. If I recollect rightly, you once belonged to the 'soapsuds' gang at Dartmoor, and had to go down on your marrow-bones and do nothing but dirty work. It was a shameful task to set a man of your talents. You don't want to have another taste, I'll bet."

"You're only trying to put me off," growled Rookson, but in a less savage tone. "You know what I want—Jenny Bassett. If she can't come to see me here, I'll go and see her. I'm talking to you straight."

"I know that well enough, old chap, and you may take it from me that when the time comes I won't baulk you."

"Baulk me? *You* baulk me? Ask me another, Bert Douglas. Understand I won't have you coming between me and Jenny."

"Don't talk rot, old chap. You make me tired. Jenny's gone on you—she's always asking about you. She thinks you were dashed clever with that false reference you worked for her. She'd never have got her situation at Eaton Square if it hadn't been for you."

"Never mind about that. I want her."

"And you shall have her, Jimmie. Why shouldn't you? Can't you see it's to my interest that you two should be the best of pals? But I must move cautiously and especially just now. One false step and—poof!—over goes the show. But if it travels well, I can see you and Jenny like a pair of turtle-doves, and never without a sovereign in your pockets. All you want is a chance to show what stuff you're made of, and that chance is coming along, so don't crab it."

The easy manner, the insinuating voice, the air of good humour, which Douglas could assume when he liked, had their effect. Rookson calmed down, and a cigar which Douglas gave him completed his cure.

"Buck up, dear boy," said Douglas lightly. "I depend on you, and if you go down, I go too. Anyhow, I'll get now. So long."

He pulled on his lavender suede gloves, and swinging his tightly rolled silk umbrella—glossy hat, gloves, umbrella, patent leather shoes and

spats, were the charms he believed in he sauntered out with a swaggering carriage of the shoulders and mincing gait which he always affected when he was in what he called his "war paint."

Outwardly everything seemed to be going well with Douglas, but inwardly he did not feel comfortable. What he had just seen was the first time Rookson had shown signs of one of his "bursts." The fit had passed off, but it was by no means certain it would not return.

"I'm treading on eggshells," he muttered, biting his lips. "Usual woman threatens to upset the apple cart. I wonder if he owes Jenny a grudge. I mustn't let her suspect anything. In spite of what she says the girl's a bit afraid of Jim as it is, and if she knew what *I* know about him, she'd be in a deuce of a funk. I suppose they'll have to meet, but hanged if I like the idea. Now that Jim's done his work I've no further use for him, but— "

Douglas finished the sentence with a shrug of the shoulders. For the moment he could see no way out of the difficulty. Rookson was fixed to him by more bonds than one.

Douglas took the direction of Russell Square. His intention was to prowl about the West End and sport his fine clothes. He knew the haunts of the "boys"—in other words, men more or less associated with the turf, who, when in London, appear to pass their lives in saloon bars and refreshment buffets. They have "houses of call" in every part of the metropolis, and, whatever may be the nature of the mysterious business they engage in, it cannot be done without the assistance of drinks, long talks in the lowest of under tones, and much travelling of

suspicious, shifty eyes towards any stranger who may chance to be near.

On his release from Dartmoor, Douglas knew that his career in the city was at an end, and he joined the "boys." He had then enough money to start as a "toff," and his crafty brain and gentlemanly address were at once appreciated. He was one of the class known indifferently as "fumblers" or "whisperers," whose aim is to get hold of young men with more money than brains, and make use of them in any way which would put coin into the pockets of the "whisperer." For a time things went well, and then the gang overstepped the mark and hastily made themselves scarce to avoid the embraces of the law.

A long spell of ill-luck followed Douglas, and he avoided the hostelries where, under the name of "Gentleman Fred," he had held a small court, treating everyone right royally. He could have joined a lower grade of the "boys," but this would mean serving where he had once reigned, and sinking to a level from which he would never rise. The lower grade contained hooligans and bruisers, and association with such gentry was unthinkable. These gentlemen were always ready to go anywhere and do anything, from "bashing" to burglary, provided they were well paid. Douglas preferred to work alone and do his own bashing and burgling, if either were necessary. He was just now, however, flying at much higher game.

He had pretty well worked out his plan of operation, but it had a weak point—so much depended upon other people. This was dead against his own theory and practice, but there was no help for it.

Another drawback was that his two assistants had to be paid, and though he had satisfied them until now, the necessity of keeping up the payments was a constant source of anxiety. However, he hoped much from the "boys," as the higher- lass touched nothing where the profits did not run into big figures, and it was on the chance of running across some of his old friends that he lounged into one wine bar after another, in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross.

He met with no success. Apparently the old set had broken up, and the new men did not know Douglas. At all events he did not know them He began to get thoroughly savage, and the drinks he had to order did not add to his good temper He wasted quite three hours without any result, and about five o'clock he came out of an establishment in Chandos Street, moody and depressed and in the humour to quarrel with anybody. He sauntered towards Charing Cross, uncertain what to do He had not money enough to work through an expensive dinner—the only thing at the moment to his taste—and it was too early to seek the distraction of a music hall

Douglas turned towards the Strand, and when opposite the railway station, he saw a lady waiting while the taxi she had hailed drew up at the pavement. For a moment his face flushed angrily He had recognised his wife!

CHAPTER XVI

HUSBAND AND WIFE

BEFORE Alicia had time to enter the vehicle, Douglas was by her side, his hand on her arm. She turned and faced him. She started, it was true, but she did not show the fear he expected.

"What do you want?" she asked, in a fairly steady voice and calm manner, though in reality she was greatly agitated.

"To accompany you, of course. I've the right. You know that as well as I do."

"I do *not* know it. If you persist in annoying and persecuting me, I shall ask the first policeman who passes to protect me."

"Do so by all means, and you'll see what'll happen. I've but to ask you in his presence whether I am not your husband, and the policeman'll dry up. He knows better than to interfere between man and wife."

"Possibly. Most husbands think they may treat their wives as they like, and that no one has a right to say a word."

"Ditto wives," retorted Douglas. "But the merits of that question have, I fancy, no interest for either of us. In any case, I take it, this isn't the place to discuss it. Don't forget, Alicia, I've let you alone for some little time, although I could have seen you whenever I wanted. Every

move you've made is known to me. I know when you left Uxbridge, I know how long you've been staying at Poynter's Hotel, I know how for more than a week you've been looking for apartments."

"You've been spying on me. It's despicable," she cried hotly.

"All's fair in love and war," said he, smiling disagreeably, "and in your case it's doubly fair, because I'm loving you and fighting you at the same time. I've something to say to you, and shall enjoy a *tête á tête* in a taxi. 'A *tête á tête* in a taxi' sounds like a comic song, doesn't it?"

Alicia felt her heart beating rapidly. Her husband's banter was as hard to endure as his bullying. For the moment she hardly knew what to do or say.

"May I?" said he, opening the taxi door, and holding out his hand. "I don't suppose you'd care to have me call at Poynter's. If we're going to have a row, we'd better have it in the seclusion of a taxi where no one can hear the nasty things we may say to each other."

"As you please," she said icily.

He did not expect so ready a surrender. He bowed, and would have assisted her into the taxi, but she ignored his proffered hand. The chauffeur glanced round for his instructions. Douglas put his head inside the taxi.

"Don't let me interfere with your programme. What shall I tell the man?"

"What you like. I've altered my mind."

"We'll simply have a 'joy ride,' eh? Darby and Joan, you know—a good idea. Go westward," he called out to the chauffeur, "along Piccadilly."

Douglas got into the taxi and sat by the side of Alicia, who looked straight before her, ignoring him completely. He glanced at her from his corner without saying a word.

The meeting was as much a surprise to him as to her, and it was a lie that he had anything particular he wanted to say. The day's annoyances, disappointments and uncertainties, had reached their climax when he caught sight of his wife. He was looking for somebody on whom to vent his ill-temper, and Alicia presented herself at an opportune moment. Had she been frightened, had she implored him tremblingly to let her alone, he would have felt some satisfaction. The sense of power, of trampling upon [illegible] one weaker than himself, was what he would have enjoyed, but Alicia had defied him, more perhaps by her manner than by her words, and he quivered with anger.

Douglas had never been able to decide what was the best course to take with Alicia, and yet it was all important he should do so before going a step further with his audacious scheme. The position was full of difficulty and contradiction. Although it was through her that he hoped to possess himself of David Haggar's money, yet she was the obstacle in the way of his success. At the inception of the idea, it seemed to him an easy thing to talk her over. He remembered her infatuation for him — at least, it must have been infatuation, or she would never have consented to so mad a marriage. In those days he thought she believed everything he told her. She appeared to him to have no will of her own, and though the catastrophe which came upon him so suddenly had, of

course, opened her eyes to the character of the man she had married, and had made her conscious how grossly she had been deceived, he had a firm belief in his theory that a woman never forgets the man who won her first love, and no matter what he may do, she will always have a tender regard for him. The romance of girlhood is difficult to kill. It is the one remembrance that a woman cherishes. The hero of her romance may be base, but she can separate the man's baseness from her love for him; the first she can forget, the second is part of her life.

But the attitude Alicia assumed towards him did not square with this theory. It seemed to him useless to hope for any tenderness from her. Sentiment clearly would be a waste of time; intimidation was the only alternative, and intimidation was in his mind as he sat meditating how to spring an attack upon her. Somehow he could not marshal his forces. His evil passions, his desire to see her suffer, to punish her for not showing the slightest sign of affection for him, and above all, his jealousy, overpowered everything.

"How's your friend the bounder? I suppose you and he are still thick," he broke out savagely.

Not a word came from her. She had steeled herself to his insults.

"Who's paying your bill at Povnter's? You can't live there for nothing, you know."

Alicia heard him unmoved, and her silence rather enraged him.

"What are you taking that room at Shepherd's Bush for? Have they discovered at Povnter's who you are, and have they asked you to shift?

You don't call yourself Alicia Montrose there, you know. I guess it's been found out you're passing under an alias. Why don't you call yourself by your husband's name—*my* name?"

"You know why—Frederick Verlan."

She spoke coldly, deliberately, and without moving the direction of her eyes.

"Oh, you're acting in *my* interests, are you?" he sneered.

"I've nothing to tell you concerning either my thoughts or my present or future actions. As, thanks to your spies, you already know so much about me, you can probably satisfy your curiosity without my assistance."

"That's more than likely. I mean to be your shadow, my dear Alicia. It gives me no end of amusement to watch your manœuvres and your wrigglings how to escape me."

"And why? What am I to you?"

"My wife, my darling. Strange that you should need reminding. You can't wriggle out of your marriage vows, you know."

"You're mistaken. There's one way."

For the first time Alicia turned her head and fixed her eyes on his face. Her voice was very low, almost a whisper, but every word was very distinct. He did not answer for nearly a minute. He dared not meet her gaze.

"I understand," said he at last, a little huskily, "but I don't think you'll take that way, Alicia. It's not in you. You may have eyes as attractive as Delilah's, but there's nothing else about you that resembles her. You're a woman I could

trust with a secret. I once told you so in the old days."

"You told me many things in the old days. There's not one I want to remember.

"Possibly, but for all that you can't forget. No, you won't take that *one* way. Anyhow, if it's in your mind it's only fair to give me warning."

"You shall know in good time. It all depends upon yourself. Leave me alone—that's all I ask."

His eyes lost their anxious look, a glint of satisfaction had leaped into them. He was beginning to read what was in her mind in regard to himself. This was what he was so desirous of knowing.

"Leave you alone? Well, I'm quite prepared to do that—on terms. It's a matter of a perfectly amicable arrangement, provided you're not so stupid as to put your back up. I'm quite prepared to enter into a compact by which I bind myself not to seek to see you or take the slightest notice of you. I'll look upon you as dead, if you like, and you'll be free to do as you please."

"I don't gather your meaning," said she, after a pause. "I can't imagine any compact worth the paper it's written on——"

"There'll be no writing," he interposed.

"Writing or no writing, I can't imagine, I repeat, any compact which will give me my freedom, unless it annuls our hateful marriage. No compact can do that."

"I quite agree with you. It wants something more than a compact. Unfortunately, the arrangement in my mind doesn't help you in that direction. On the contrary, one imperative condition is that

evidence of our marriage should, if necessary, be produced."

The conversation had taken a turn which had driven away Douglas's black humour. He was now anxious to conciliate Alicia. He was still disposed to be jealous; he hated Graydon more than ever, but he was willing to sink both his jealousy and hatred if he could only be rich. He had often confessed, to use his own words, that there was nothing he would not do for "oof," and this was true.

"Evidence of our marriage!" repeated Alicia, with a shudder she could not repress. "If *that* is a condition, then your 'arrangement' is impossible."

Douglas was not irritated. He did not despair of talking his wife over, but he did not expect to do it all at once. He was beginning to make a little progress in solving the formidable problem before him, and he considered that he had settled two points—one that Alicia was willing to discuss the situation, and the other and more important, that she could be trusted.

By this time the taxi had reached Hyde Park Corner. The chauffeur had gone the length of Piccadilly, and he stopped to enquire if his fare wished to alight.

"No," called out Douglas. "Go along Park Lane into Oxford Street."

"Now that we're talking reasonably," he went on, after the taxi had started, "we may as well thrash the thing out as far as we can at present. I apologise for taking your memory back to the old times which now seem so disagreeable to you, but I'm afraid it's necessary. You must admit that

when I was snatched from you, I never gave you away. The detective who arrested me in the quiet little roadside inn when we were about to sit down to our modest wedding breakfast, hadn't the slightest idea that within the previous hour we had been made man and wife. No one knew it excepting the doddering old parson who performed the ceremony, his deaf clerk, and the snuffy old woman—church-cleaner, pew opener, or whatever she may have been. The detective wasn't a bad sort. I told him you were my best girl, and that what I'd done had nothing to do with you, and I gave him a sovereign to say nothing about you in his report, and he acted squarely. Instead of your going off with the husband of your choice, as originally intended, you returned to school at the end of the holidays, and I went for a change of air to the county gaol and afterwards to Dartmoor. Not a word has ever escaped my lips about you. I was sentenced as Bert Douglas, and Bert Douglas I am to those who know me; to those who don't I take any name that I fancy."

"Why are you telling me this? I don't care to know."

"I wish to show that I considered you in the old days, and that I wish to consider you now."

"So far as I can understand, because you concealed our marriage five years ago, you want now to make it public. It's most extraordinary and contradictory."

"It may sound so, but it isn't, and you're wrong if you think I desire publicity. I don't. If there was any way without it, I'd take that way, but you see old Haggar—what are you about?"

Greatly agitated, Alicia, her face pale even to her lips, had sprung to her feet and was calling to the chauffeur to stop. Roughly seizing her, Douglas forced her back into the seat.

"I'll shoot you—by the living God, I will if you dare to made a row. You don't know me, Alicia—you don't know what I can do."

"I can guess," she faltered.

His hand had gone to his hip. She saw the shining barrel of a revolver. But the sight of the weapon did not terrify her so much as his face—the tightly drawn white lips, the square protruding lower jaw, the dilated nostrils, the fierce tigerish gleam in his eyes.

"You can guess, can you? I'm glad of it. I'll tell you what kind of mind I'm in. Seems to me we're face to face with what's up against both of us. The moment's come sooner than I expected, but we were bound to go through with it some time or another. Sit still, do you hear, unless you want to give the newspapers a sensation. 'Tragedy in a Taxi'—sounds well, doesn't it?"

Alicia could not decide whether this was bravado intended to frighten her, but to judge from his expression he looked capable of carrying out his threat.

The chauffeur had not heard her call to him; the taxi was going at a fairly rapid pace, in another minute the Marble Arch would be reached and the man would want a fresh direction. Douglas anticipated this by telling him to proceed along the Bayswater Road. Alicia dared not interpose. Her companion had not replaced his revolver.

"I don't know what made you fly into a tantrum

just now," he went on eyeing her, "and I don't care. It may have been nerves or it may have been that the sight of the policeman we passed at the time, tempted you."

"No," gasped Alicia. "I never saw him."

"I've only your word for that, but it doesn't matter. I've shown you that I'm prepared for all risks, and you'd better take the lesson to heart. Now I'm going to finish this business once for all. I mentioned just now your friend David Haggar— —"

He paused as if to watch the effect of his words. She winced and shivered slightly, but remained silent

"I've lately come into the possession of some very important information about the old chap It concerns you and it concerns me, but for the moment it's a close secret and known only to two other persons, the witnesses to his signing his will."

"His will!" cried Alicia vehemently. "He never made one."

"You mean no will was found. That's nothing. He meant to make one—the lawyer said as much at the inquest. But he didn't know what *I* know. Mind you, I've not seen the document, but from what the witnesses tell me there's not the shadow of doubt he did make it at the Empress Hotel, and on the very day he started to travel with you to Southhampton. That will's got to be produced Shall I tell you why?"

"No. I want to hear nothing about it and—and least of all from *your* lips."

"You'll hear it from none other, that's certain. The witnesses got to know in some way that the

greater part of the old man's fortune has been left to you."

"I don't believe it. If these witnesses knew this, why didn't they come forward at the inquest when so much was said about Mr. Haggar's money and the will?"

Douglas was not prepared for this shrewd question, but he was soon ready with a plausible answer.

"The witnesses are ignorant people—a couple of servants at the hotel. Servants are no readers of newspapers."

"How did *you* come to hear of these witnesses?"

"What a clever barrister you'd make, Alicia! You're quite skilful at cross-examination. So much the better, as you'll be able to sift what I say. It's only natural you should want to know how I heard of these people. It all comes back to the 'basic fact'—this expression you will notice is quite up to date—that you're my wife, and consequently what interests you interests me. I took upon myself the duty of making a few enquiries about the old gentleman who was so fond of you. That was only natural too, wasn't it? I had a right to be jealous, but I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. I learned all about his life at the Empress Hotel, and *that's* how I got in touch with the two servants I mentioned just now. Are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied or not, I want to hear no more. Every word you say horrifies me. Let me get out if you've finished."

Alicia's voice had sunk to a whisper. Terror and abhorrence had partly deprived her of her strength.

Douglas smiled grimly. She was in the condition which suited his purpose—completely terrorised. The revolver was no longer necessary, and he slipped it back into his hip-pocket.

"Finished? Not quite. I'm coming to the most important part. It lies in a nutshell. If the will is found and it turns out that you've benefitted by it, all you have to do is to take the goods the gods provide you, hand me over any sum we may agree upon, and we say good-bye."

"It's infamous—atrocious!" she gasped. "I'll have nothing to do with so despicable a plot."

"There's yet another way," he went on, ignoring her protest. "As your lawful husband, I can act for you and claim the money on your behalf. This plan has the disadvantage of compelling you to own up to your marriage, but if we go on the first idea you need not open your mouth. You can continue to be Alicia Montrose."

"Oh, it's horrible! Do as you please, only for God's sake leave me out of your shocking designs."

"Can't be done. You *must* figure in it. Decidedly the first plan's the better of the two," Douglas continued meditatively. "As Alicia Montrose you'll only need to take possession of your own, and we can easily come to terms afterwards. Plan number two has the unpleasant drawback of suggesting that you were in league with the author of the crime, and that you arranged it with him beforehand. Do you see? The mystery of the photograph of the eyes would be explained in that case, wouldn't it?"

Alicia, trembling violently, shrank from him. Her husband's callousness was appalling. Yet

despite her terror, she realized the logic of his way of putting the case. He was quite right when he said she *must* figure in it. If he spoke the truth about the will, then it was clear that David Haggar's death was to her gain, and everyone would say that there *might* be something in the *Scorpion's* theory. Sealed as her lips had been hitherto, they were doubly so now.

"I can't listen to you, I *won't*. Every word you say makes my blood run cold."

She seized the speaking tube communicating with the chauffeur and called to him to stop. Douglas offered no opposition. He had disclosed his plan, and he felt sure Alicia would be secret. All was going well.

The taxi stopped; so also did one which had been following it all the way from Charing Cross. Douglas got out first. He did not attempt to assist Alicia to alight. Perhaps he knew she would repulse him.

"I suppose you've coin enough to pay the fellow? You're richer than I am, I'll bet. Thanks for a pleasant half hour. Good-bye—for the present."

He did not wait for a reply but, raising his hat, strode away; while Alicia remained in the taxi in a flutter of agitation and uncertainty what to do. She was about to go to Shepherd's Bush to make arrangements for removing to her new room when the encounter with Douglas took place. Was it any use carrying out that intention now? Could she ever escape the pursuit of her husband? It seemed hopeless, especially in view of the detestable scheme he contemplated; but whether or not, she determined to alter her plans. She sprang

out, and at the same moment the occupant of the second taxi approached her. She raised her eyes and saw Eric Graydon.

"At last," she heard him say. He was holding out his hand, and she could not but take it. For a few seconds they were silent, Graydon holding her hand with a pressure which seemed to say "we must not be separated again

CHAPTER XVII

ON PASSION'S TIDE

GRAYDON saw how worn and haggard Alicia looked, and his heart was moved with pity. He had recognised Douglas, and had he thought only of himself, he would have spoken to a policeman who happened to be near, but until the mystery of the fellow's association with Alicia was solved, his hands were tied. He could see that his unexpected appearance had caused her embarrassment, and to give her a chance of regaining her self-possession, he looked at the taximeter, saw what there was to pay, and put his hand in his pocket.

"No, no," she interposed. "You mustn't. Please don't take that gentleman's money," said she to the chauffeur. "I engaged you and I'm responsible."

"Too late—too late," cried Graydon smilingly. "That'll do."

The last words were addressed to the chauffeur, who grasped the situation at once. He readily accepted Graydon's half-crown, interpreted his "that'll do" to mean that no change was required, and speedily departed.

"Why did you do that?" said she reproachfully, but with a gladness in her eyes which belied her word.

"Don't worry about trifles. I've so much I want to say to you. Let's go into the park. We can't talk here."

Her silence was consent, and he took her unresisting hand and drew it beneath his arm almost with an air of possession. Never had Alicia felt the need of someone to talk to, if not to place confidence in, more than at that moment. The very sight of Eric Graydon gave her courage. He was practical, and she clung to him all the more because she herself was just the reverse. Emotion, impulse, sentiment, had always governed her.

The recollection of that terrible interview in the taxi gradually passed away under the influence of companionship. The surroundings had a share in restoring steadiness to her nerves. It was a glorious autumn sunset, and a sunset in London, when circumstances are favourable, can be more picturesque and glowing than unobservant people imagine. The smoke, so obnoxious, so depressing when charged with damp, takes gorgeous hues such as the clear atmosphere of the country rarely shows. The sun, a ball of fire low down, glinted through the trees—now losing their foliage. To the east were patches of gold alternated with delicate tints of pale green and purple; and above, led up to by a marvellous gradation of colour, stretched a vast canopy of dull, lurid crimson. Faint blue was beyond, but it seemed far, far away, and was scarcely more than a suggestion of infinite space.

After passing through the nearest gate they turned to the right, and presently found themselves in that picturesque, secluded, sylvan walk, which runs parallel to the Bayswater Road. All was very quiet and peaceful, the more so, perhaps, because of the distant murmur of London's traffic.

Graydon was the first to break the silence. He

could see Alicia was at that moment fighting against the stress and strain of highly wrought feeling, and he spoke lightly on purpose.

"My lucky star has been guiding me to-day," said he.

"I'm very glad. In what way?"

"It drew me towards you."

"I don't call that lucky. I shall never bring you luck, Mr. Graydon. Our first meeting was an unfortunate one, and nothing has happened since to do you any good. Rather the reverse."

"It was good enough for me, and though I'm not a fatalist, I believe it was to be. Just think—you disappeared. Oh, I'm not going to reproach you—but fate has thrown us together again."

"Scarcely quite that, is it? You had something to do with guiding fate's finger. I saw you at Charing Cross, and I suppose you saw me; though I didn't think so at the time."

"You're quite right. Yes, I saw you, and I also noticed you were with a person in whom I am interested—"

"You—interested—in that man?" she exclaimed agitatedly.

"Slightly; but more on your account than on my own. You seemed anxious to avoid him—nay, it struck me you were afraid, though knowing your courage, I hardly like to make such a suggestion—and—forgive me—I took a taxi and followed yours. I can't explain why, but I felt you were in danger in some way, and I was anxious to be at hand in case you needed help."

"You're very kind, but there was no necessity—I—I almost wish you hadn't troubled, but I thank

you all the same. I suppose," she went on slowly, "I ought to explain why I left Uxbridge. If you went there you had a lost journey."

"Not altogether lost. A new experience is always more or less a gain."

Alicia looked at him blankly, and Graydon interpreted the look to mean that she was unaware he was the man who had been assaulted and robbed close to Vine Cottage. He decided it was not worth while to enlighten her.

"Then you did go to Uxbridge?" said she.

"Yes, and I called at your house but you had left. I saw the house agent, who told me you had gone to Brighton, and to Brighton accordingly I went, but you were not there—at least, I could not find you

I came back to London at a loss what to do. Every day I wandered about the streets—nothing like the streets of London when you're in a fix and can't see your way out—and luck, as I told you, came in my way. I saw you and—here I am."

They were now sitting down. Alicia was bending slightly forward, her hands tightly clasped, her arms resting on her knees. Her face, though still very pale, had lost some of the worn haggard look which had been so noticeable when he assisted her out of the taxi. Suddenly she turned her head, and her eyes, larger and more lustrous than he had ever seen them, were fixed on his.

"Why do you take so much trouble over me?"

"There's only one answer to *that* question."

She did not ask what that answer was. Perhaps she guessed

"It was a mistake. We can never be more than strangers to each other

"Strangers? In a way possibly—but friends all the same."

"That's all the more reason why we should say good-bye. I warn you. Association with me has done you no good. It has only involved you in scandal. You confided to me once what your political ambitions were. I feel I've spoiled them. You've perhaps seen," she went on nervously, "what has been written about you and—and about me?"

"Yes, and my impulse was to find the author of the slanders and thrash him. He can't be touched in any other way. His libels have been carefully kept within the law—at least, so I'm told, but I have my doubts. I feel strongly tempted to take proceedings—not on my account, but on yours."

"No. You must do nothing of the kind. There's only one way by which you can please me."

"Yes? Well?"

"I've already told you. We must say good-bye," said she, not without agitation.

"I refuse—unless you can convince me it is for your happiness. *Can* you convince me?"

Alicia was silent and her eyes drooped beneath his.

"No, you can't," he exclaimed triumphantly. "Own that I'm right."

"It's not a question of my happiness."

"What is it then?"

Again she raised her eyes; anxiety, tenderness, apprehension, were written in them.

"Your safety."

"The worst reason a woman can give a man, if he loves her. If loving you, Alicia, means danger to

myself, then I adore you, and I'll take the risk of anything that may follow."

He enclosed her two hands in his. She did not repulse him but she did not show any emotion.

"Love—adoration—they seem empty words to me. I don't believe you realise what you're saying."

"Indeed I do and I repeat it."

He felt her hands go suddenly cold. She withdrew them from his and rose to her feet.

"It's no use," she whispered tremblingly. "The only thing I can say—the only thing that I *must* say is farewell."

"Never."

A swift interchange of glances and the next minute his arms were around her and his lips pressed on hers. The hour was propitious, for the sun had gone down and the shadows were gathering. No one was near, but had it not been so Eric would have been unconscious of the fact. He could see no one but Alicia. The world at that moment held but their two selves.

And she? Had she really returned his kiss? Her hands were cold and she was trembling, and her emotion only accentuated his ardour. His embrace tightened and she made no protest. It was hardly a moment for many words and for a brief space both were silent.

"Now what about parting?" he breathed.

She sighed deeply.

"It makes no difference," at length she faltered. "We must still say good-bye."

"But—you love me. You've told me so."

"Told you? I?"

" Do you think your eyes don't speak ? "

Alicia shuddered. Graydon's words meant to be so tender were to her full of a different significance. Some process of t lepathy was at work. Her thought passed to him, and the photograph which was the cause of so much talk came into his mind !

A long silence. Their minds travelling together went over the terrible details of the tragedy. For a moment the black shadow of David Haggar's unsolved death intruded itself into their love, but only for a moment. That love was strong enough to withstand its withering influence. Once more Eric kissed her and in that kiss there was less passion than pity and tender affection.

" Dearest Alicia, why don't you trust me all in all ? You're suffering and suffering alone. You needn't contradict me because I know it is so, and I can't bear to think of it."

But she was silent. She only looked up pleadingly as if to entreat him not to put questions which would torture her to answer, if, indeed, she could answer them.

All at once she uttered an exclamation. Her eyes were resting on a newly-healed scar just above the ear. The hair had been cut close round the wound, and had not grown sufficiently long to cover the cicatrix.

" You've been hurt ! " she cried. " Why didn't you tell me ? How did it happen ? "

His resolve to keep the incident at Uxbridge from her began to waver. He was tempted by the tones of love in her voice. It would be sweet to have her sympathy and pity. If love meant anything at all it meant perfect confidence. Perhaps if he began

she would give him hers in return. What about her companion of the taxi? He had purposely said nothing to her about this man after his passing reference to the subject, but now that he was sure she loved him, they had a common enemy to fight and they would be better able to do so if they joined their forces.

"Why don't you tell me?" she burst out, when he did not at once reply. She spoke with an intensity of feeling which sent Graydon's pulses galloping.

"Don't be alarmed. It's not a very serious affair; merely one of those coincidences which seem to dog both you and me whether we like it or not. The coincidence in this case is that I was attacked and robbed within five minutes walk of Vine Cottage the day I went to Uxbridge to see you."

"*You?* Was it you who were knocked down and almost killed? Oh . . . . . what time of the day was this?" she broke off suddenly.

"About nine o'clock in the evening."

"Merciful heaven! And to think I was so near and knew nothing."

"That was not so extraordinary. No one knew for over a week who I was. You see I was insensible—slight concussion of the brain so the doctor said—and as everything I had in my pockets was taken—even the scrap of paper with your address upon it—there was no clue to my identity for some days. I expect, by the time I recovered, you had left Vine Cottage."

"Did you see who struck you?" she said presently in low, constrained tones.

"No, and the police haven't been able to find out anything. They suspect one man—I may tell

you that it's pretty certain there were two in the business—but who the other was they haven't the slightest notion.

"Oh, it's horrible—horrible and yet—ah, was I not right when I said you were in danger because of me? Oh, please go and never try to see me any more."

"Danger because of you? Well, isn't that the very reason why I should stick to you? What's the use of keeping up the mystery any longer? Don't you know that I want to help you; that I should never cease to reproach myself if I left you to battle alone? You tell me *I* am in danger—what about *you?* Aren't you in mortal dread of some person? Do you suppose I've forgotten your alarm at Winchester railway station when you were sitting in the train, and I was on the platform seeing you off? You asked me then not to leave you—not in so many words, I admit, but what you meant was virtually *that*. Didn't you say 'don't move from the carriage window until the train starts.' Wasn't that to prevent you being seen by someone of whom you were afraid? I obeyed and you thanked me and said you would never forget. Is that a true account of what occurred or not?"

"Quite true—quite. I was confused and frightened. I had been taken by surprise. I didn't know what to do. If I could have foreseen what was to follow I would never have asked you to do what you did. You were kindness itself, but it was useless—worse than useless. It gave you a false impression."

"Of what? Of whom?"

"Of me. You must have thought—oh, well, it's

over. What's done is done, and it all comes round to the same thing." She sighed wearily. "You and I must say good-bye."

"Not until we've thrashed this matter out. I'm sure it's the best thing to do. You're not angry with me for being so obstinate, are you?"

"Oh, no—only distressed and worried."

"Of course you are; but let me tell you a little more. I believe I saw the man by whom you didn't want to be seen. He was standing with a companion near the bookstall. I thought at the time it was so, but now I'm certain. Was it not this same man who followed you into the taxi at Charing Cross—who rode with you?"

Alicia bowed her head. She could not trust herself to speak.

"You go in terror of him. Isn't it so?"

"Well, and what does it matter to anyone but myself?"

Graydon seized her hands and held them tightly, meanwhile gazing into her eyes.

"You're not fair to me, Alicia. You talk as if you don't believe me when I say I love you. Not matter to me that you've an enemy of whom you go in dread? How can you think that? I don't want to know your secrets excepting so far as any knowledge of them may be necessary in order to protect you. I'm going to tell you what's in my mind in regard to this man. I'm convinced he's what the Americans call a 'crook.' It's not a nice thing to say of anybody whom *you* know, Alicia, but the truth must be faced sometimes, mustn't it?"

Alicia made no answer. She did not seek to withdraw her hands, but stood quietly, her eyes

cast down like those of a child undergoing reproof. Graydon continued:

"I don't wish to be unjust, but what am I to think when I've discovered that the fellow he was with at Winchester is a released convict and a professional rogue, a thief and a forger—so the police tell me. And they told me something else. They say that this ex-convict came down to Uxbridge in the same train as I did, and that he was seen hanging about afterwards as though waiting for a friend to come by a later train. It's not known whether the two eventually met, but the police theory is that they did, and that there's every probability they were the scoundrels who attacked me. The police are now searching for the convict and they are confident that when they lay their hands on him, it won't be long before they arrest the other. What have you to say to that?"

"Nothing," she murmured faintly.

"I'm sorry for it, because if you were free to speak it might help us. Do you know what I should have done when I saw that flashily-dressed man accost you at Charing Cross but for you? When he got out of the taxi I should have followed him until I met a policeman; then given him into custody and taken the risk of having made a mistake."

She went very white and her breath came quick and short.

"Into custody? And on what charge?" she stammered out.

"Of being concerned in the murderous attack upon me, of course."

Alicia drew a deep sigh as though Graydon's

answer was a relief. Her reticence was to him a great disappointment. He felt he had a right to her confidence, and she had given him none.

"I suppose if I were to ask point blank what you are to this man you'd refuse to tell me?"

"You must *not* ask," she cried with emphasis.

"Aren't you shielding him?"

"I can't answer your questions. You must think what you please."

Alicia paused and went on agitatedly:

"There's one thing, perhaps, I ought to tell you. I shouldn't like you to be under any misapprehension as to the motive of my silence and of my wishing to live quietly by myself unknown to anyone. It was for your sake, Eric. I dreaded to think what price *you* might have to pay for our friendship."

"I suppose that thought came into your mind after you saw the person—shall I call him?—at Winchester?"

"And was I not right? You were attacked afterwards, and it was through me."

"Through you?"

"Yes. I departed from my determination never to see you again. I was weak—I was lonely—my depression of spirits prevented me carrying out my intention of writing a novel, and when Mr. Perry's letter came telling me of your request for my address, I yielded to the temptation of seeing you and talking with you once more. For, Eric dear, I *did* want you—heaven forgive me! It was a terrible mistake. You suffered for it and so did I. It shall never happen again. Nothing you can say will alter my resolve to bid you farewell."

Alicia talked calmly of parting yet he could feel her quivering within his embrace, for he had once more thrown his arms round her.

"In spite of what you say," he whispered hoarsely, "you're clinging to me all the same. Why do you torture yourself unnecessarily? I quote your own words against you: 'I shall never forget' was what you said. I shall not forget either, and, if refusing to give you up means fighting for you, then I'll fight."

He grated the last words between his teeth. There was no mistaking his determination.

"No—no—no—" she cried vehemently.

With a violent effort she tore herself from his embrace and stood apart from him panting and her eyes distended wildly. Graydon approached her and she agitatedly waved him back.

"Don't come near me," she cried distractedly.

"In heaven's name why?"

"Because I've been wicked—because I've deceived you—because I ought to have told you the truth straight out half-an-hour ago."

"And why not now? No, no I don't mean that." Her expression had changed and she shrank still further from him. "Don't take any notice of what I said. Please do not tell me anything you'd rather I didn't know. What does the truth concerning you matter to me? I only know I love you. I can say no more. Won't you understand," he continued imploringly, "that I don't lay down any conditions?"

"I understand perfectly," she returned in a low voice, "but we're come to the parting of the ways,

so why say any more? You will be kind won't you, and—and leave me."

"Be kind? My God, do you imagine I could be anything else to you? I don't believe you know what a man's love is or you wouldn't talk so coldly—so cruelly."

There was something in his distress which touched her. She drew nearer to him a pace or two.

"I've said nothing, Eric, which terrible necessity doesn't compel me to say. I pity you from the bottom of my heart and you would pity me too if you did but know."

The whistle of the park keeper was heard in the distance. Their moments of love-making were rapidly dwindling. The pathos of her voice was not to be resisted. He grasped her outstretched hands and he drew her towards him. Her head was on his shoulder and her eyelashes touched his cheek.

"Alicia, tell me—do you love me?" he whispered.

"I love you, Eric, I love you."

The words were but a breath, but he would not have them uttered louder. They both trembled. The emotion of the woman had communicated itself to the man. It was sweet to hear her say she loved him, yet the words were dashed with gloom. That note almost of despair in her voice filled him with apprehension.

The park keeper was coming nearer. His discordant whistle jarred upon their nerves. Maybe the feeling that she might never see Eric again, and the consciousness that at that moment they were heart to heart carried her away. Her head swum she gripped his hand convulsively.

"Eric," she murmured rapidly, "I want to tell you something."

He could feel her heart beating wildly and his was galloping not less furiously.

"That man you saw me with this evening," she whispered, "is my husband!"

He could say nothing. His grasp of her insensibly relaxed.

"Don't scorn me—don't think hardly of me," she went on tremblingly. "I felt I couldn't go on any longer under false pretences. If I hadn't told you I should have been acting a lie. I'm glad it's over."

"You've nothing to reproach yourself with," he returned, finding voice at last. "If you hate this husband of yours—if he's a scoundrel—if you're afraid of him, why should the fact that you're tied to a man simply by law, make any difference to—to our friendship?"

"It makes all the difference. Don't let us deceive ourselves, Eric. It's useless to talk of friendship when we mean love."

"I suppose you're right," he exclaimed desperately. "There seems to be nothing left but—I can't say the wretched words."

"Closing time," suddenly said a gruff voice quite near them.

Silently they walked out of the sheltered walk into the open park and through the gate into the Bayswater Road.

"Which way are you going? Shall I call you a taxi?"

There was nothing in the words, nothing in the question but to Alicia it signified that all was over. It was what she had asked for, but it was a poignant

thrust for all that. She bent her head slightly. Now that the moment had come better get it done with as soon as possible.

A taxi was passing and he hailed it. He assisted her into the vehicle and stood with hat uplifted waiting her instructions.

" Where shall I tell him to drive to ? " he asked.

" Charing Cross, please "

Graydon bowed and spoke to the chauffeur. Then he stood bareheaded until the taxi moved ; when it was out of sight he felt that part of his life had gone with it.

CHAPTER XVIII

FINDING THE WILL

DOUGLAS had come to look upon everybody—Alicia, Eric, Jim Rookson, Jenny Bassett, as simply puppets whom he could make dance to the tune he was playing. He had been favoured with wonderful luck. From the very beginning it had been a succession of chances and of every chance he had taken advantage. Always follow your luck was one of his favourite maxims.

It was part of his good luck, he considered, that he should have run across his wife towards the end of what had proved until that meeting a somewhat disappointing day. That interview in the taxi had settled a most important question. He had now no longer any doubt that he could proceed with safety to the next move in his daring scheme. Alicia, he decided, would not offer any opposition. So long as he let her alone she would agree to anything.

"If she knew the will was bogus it might be different but she doesn't. Who else is there to oppose me? Not a soul. Old Haggar hasn't a relative. It wouldn't be half a bad idea to employ Perry and Latimer to do the legal business. If they get a good picking out of the estate they won't trouble to raise any doubts as to the genuineness of the thing. Besides the legatee is Alicia and they're not likely to suspect *her*. It's because

of her that I have the pull. Everything's going splendidly."

But Douglas was not blind to the one weak link in the chain—Jim Rookson. Jenny he was perfectly sure about. Even if she knew all the details of his plot she would be staunch. But Jim—well Jim was a very different individual. Jim could upset his crattily prepared plans at any moment. It was to keep Jim in good humour that he did not go down to Basingstoke at once to begin his operations. Jim wanted constant supplies of money. He also required an unlimited stock of whisky. Cigars had latterly become one of his necessities. Pipes and shag tobacco were no longer good enough. His demands for luxuries had become more frequent than ever since he had seen Douglas smug, well groomed, well dressed and apparently flush of coin. Mr. Rookson argued that as he had done all the work he ought to begin to receive a benefit at the earliest opportunity. Douglas appeared to be "doing himself well," why shouldn't he? Douglas thought it policy not to oppose this argument and the result was a more liberal allowance which was a further drain upon his resources.

It was very clear he must make things easy with Jim before leaving London, but for the moment this was rather difficult to do. The readiest means of putting himself in funds was by pocket picking. He hated the "gratt;" it was low and risky but there was no alternative and the next day faultlessly, if a little flashily, attired he attended a fashionable wedding and reaped a fair harvest in the closely packed church. He got away safely because he did not attempt too much.

He posted off to his lodgings and after changing his dress and posting a remittance to Rookson, he set out to make sure of Alicia by putting Jenny once more on the watch, and he made his way to a mean street in Camden Town where for the time being Jenny was "living with mother." A slatternly woman with dirty face and low forehead, beetling brows and a coarse mouth received him cringingly.

"Yes, sir. I'll call her, sir. She's just come in, Jenny!"

There was a faint response from some unknown quarter of the house and Mrs. Bassett, a good deal of whose wickedness (the good lady had once done time for pilfering) her daughter had inherited, shuffled away. Jenny was quite five minutes before she made her appearance. She was not going to show herself to Douglas in her "dizzy-bill," and she had done a quick change in the way of her dress and her hair.

"Jenny, sweetheart," said Douglas pinching her cheek, "a little more of the old business for you to-night. You'll have to keep on 'foxing' Miss Montrose. She may go to the Shepherd's Bush place you told me of but it's on the cards that she'll change her mind. Anyhow you'll have to find out what her movements are."

"All right."

"I think you'd better start on the job at once."

"If you don't mind waiting I'll be with you in a tick. I'd like a drink. Haven't had one to-day."

Douglas nodded, told Jenny to look sharp, and whiled the time with a cigarette. At the public house where he not only treated her but bought a bottle of gin for "mother," he handed Jenny a

slip of paper on which he had written the name of a Basingstoke Hotel.

"See here, Jenny. I've written down an address where you must wire me if necessary. I'll leave it to you to decide. I expect to be away a week."

"Are you going off there to-night?"

"Yes, in about half an hour's time. If you like you can ride with me to Charing Cross."

"What are you going to do in the country?" said she when they were in the taxi.

Her little twinkling eyes went over his Norfolk jacket, his knickers and gaiters, his golfing cap, and at last rested on the hand camera he was carrying.

"My dear little magpie, if you don't ask any questions you won't hear any lies. I'm going down to Hampshire to take a few photographs. Perhaps I'll show them to you when I come back."

"I tell you what I wish you would do, chappie."

"And what's that?"

"Take *my* photo."

Douglas's face suddenly went grave. Jenny instantly saw the change and hastened to apologise for the liberty she thought she had taken.

"It's all right little one. I was thinking of something else. Yes, I'll take you some day."

Jenny said nothing. She knew very well Douglas was telling her a falsehood as to his real object in going into the country. Of course photographs often figured in cases where private enquiry agents were engaged and it was not extraordinary that Douglas should have a camera. She was perfectly certain it was not the picturesque scenery of Hampshire which he was desirous of photographing.

They parted affectionately at Charing Cross and Douglas journeyed to Basingstoke. He put up at a quiet hotel and made himself at home. The air of a man of leisure and means sat well upon him. He enquired about the show places in and around Basingstoke, went out every day with his camera and talked a good deal about the beauty of the country

On the fourth day he told the landlord, with whom he had become quite friendly, that he had been for a long walk by the side of the Basingstoke Canal, and that he had picked up something.

" Here it is—a big pocket book. I was in hopes it was stuffed with bank notes but no such luck. Still in a way it's a find and may benefit somebody. Of course, I opened it. You don't blame me, Smithers, do you ? "

" Not likely. It's just what I'd do myself. What are those papers ? " said the landlord.

" You'd never guess. One's a man's will, and the other's a very extraordinary letter addressed to some woman. The ink's run a bit with the damp, but you can read every word right enough. I suppose the pocketbook belonged to the man who made the will. There's his monogram on the outside of the book."

" Aye the silver be bright enough. In spite o' the papers being damp the book couldn't ha' been very long where you found it."

Douglas bit his lips. The landlord's sharpness had convicted him of an oversight. He had carefully moistened the documents and for two reasons —one to indicate that they had been lying among the weeds for some weeks, and the other so that

the blurring of the letters should make Rookson's forgeries still more difficult to detect. But he had quite forgotten to dull the monogram.

"Bowled out first going off," he thought with vexation. "Luckily I haven't parted with the book and before it gets into the hands of the police it shall look like the real thing."

Meanwhile the landlord was speling his way through the letter and when he came to the end his face was serious enough. He said nothing but took up the will and read that.

"Well I'm jiggered!" he burst out. "If this beant the most 'strornary thing I ever heard of. It beats cock fighting."

"What do you mean?"

"See that name? David Haggar?" went on the landlord pointing to the signature on the will.

"Of course I see it. What about it?"

"Why that was the name of the poor old gent as was murdered in a railway carriage, between Winchester and Basingstoke some three months ago. The gal who's mentioned in the will was travelling in the same train, but not in the same carriage. That was a funny thing wasn't it? They'd had a row it seems. This letter says something about it."

"Murdered! What an awful business. Who murdered him?"

"Ah, that's what a good many of us 'ud like to know. He was a clever dodger anyhow. Got clear off, an' the police never could find a clue except a travelling cap and an ulster, as were discovered near where you've been to-day—the Basingstoke Canal. Some said the cap and the ulster belonged to a chap as was seen in the train

and that it was him as murdered the old gent, and some said it wasn't, but you a finding this pocket book where you did goes to show as it *was* him."

"All this is news to me. I must have been abroad at the time."

"What are you going to do about the book?" asked the landlord

"Take it to the police of course."

"Aye, that's right. They'll be glad enough to have it. May lead to the capture of the murderer."

"Ah, shouldn't wonder."

In about an hour's time Douglas called at the police station, explained his errand and was soon closetted with the inspector.

"You did quite right to bring this book and its contents to us. It may turn out to be a most important discovery. What's your name?"

"It's not of much importance but of course you can have it—John Wallingham. I'm staying at the 'Crown' until to-morrow morning, so if you want to see me I'm to be found there. But I've told you all I know and I don't see I can do any more."

"As far as I can tell, your find will be of more value to the lady interested than to anybody else; but, of course, the story of your finding the book will have to be verified before she can take possession of anything, and you may be wanted by her solicitors."

"Then they'll have to be precious quick about it for I'm off to Brussels in a day or two."

"What's your address in town, Mr. Wallingham?"

"I've no fixed address. Sometimes I stay at a

boarding house and sometimes at some hotel the 'Metropole' for choice."

"Is that where'll you go when you leave here?"

"Most likely, but I've not decided upon anything yet. Still there's no harm in dropping a note to me at the 'Metropole.'"

Douglas strolled back to the inn, told the landlord what he had done and before long the news was all over Basingstoke. The 'Crown' did a roaring trade that evening, the gossips crowding in to know if what they had heard was really true. Douglas found himself the object of much more curiosity than he had bargained for, and the next morning announced that business called him to London. When the inspector called to make further enquiries he discovered that Mr. Wallingham had left.

At the time the inspector called "Mr. Wallingham" was, in fact, in the grimy attic of the house in Burton Crescent looking at himself in the cracked toilet glass.

The reflection was that of a man with a heavy dark moustache. Had the matter not been one of urgency Douglas would not have fixed upon himself as the finder of the pocket-book. It was of vital importance that he should not be indentified, and he could see no other way out of the difficulty but that of disguising himself. The heavy moustache certainly hid his ugly mouth and softened the square prominent jaw But was the disguise effectual?

Like most lawless men, Douglas was superstitious, and was a firm believer in omens. To be found out in a blunder at the very beginning of his enterprise had made him very uneasy and when

he was back in his own room he looked at himself anxiously in the glass.

"The moustache is all right and I think I hit upon a neat dodge of putting it on without anybody being the wiser," he thought.

The "dodge" consisted of descending the stairs at the Leicester Square Tube station after parting from Jenny, and on the way down putting on the moustache with the assistance of a pocket mirror. From this time he was Wallingham. On returning to London he removed the moustache, also on the stairs of the Tube station, and was Douglas once more.

"Yes the moustache is all right," he repeated, "and I don't think I messed up anything besides that confounded monogram."

He slowly removed the moustache and flinging it into the grate set fire to it.

"That's done. I'll leave no trace behind me of John Wallingham. Now for the toggery—that's done its duty too."

He put on his oldest and shabbiest suit, packed the Norfolk jacket, the knickers, gaiters and golfing cap, in a parcel, and got rid of them at a second hand clothiers in the Gray's Inn Road.

He hurried back to his lodgings and changed into his "swagger" suit. There was no luck in shabbiness as he had long ago discovered. If it were true that people estimated a man at his own valuation as to his abilities, it was still more true that they did so in regard to dress. When Douglas was out at elbows he fell into a slouching walk, he had a hangdog look and he became a loafer at once. A new suit of clothes, on the other hand, put

backbone into him and he felt he could hold his own with the best. He might not have any money in his pocket but his stock of impudence was unlimited, and that sometimes did as well, if not better.

"I've nothing to do now but wait. Until something appears in the papers I mustn't show myself. Meanwhile there's the question of finance. Talk about the eternal feminine? By Jove she's not half so eternal as this confounded want of cash."

He did the rounds of the haunts where the "boys" were to be found. It was a good omen he thought when he ran against a friend with whom he had been very intimate in his city days. This man had acted as tout for a swindling company promoter, but, like Douglas, his vocation was gone and he was living on his wits. He had had his ups and downs and just now was in luck. It was the good old "confidence trick" he explained which had put him on his feet.

"Colonial mugs are the game; picking them up's as easy as shelling peas. Why don't you take a hand old man? You're just the sort. You've got the patter and the style."

The proposition was tempting but for the moment Douglas hesitated about doing anything which would compel him to lie low. The drawback of the "confidence trick" was the liability to encounter the victim afterwards and be pounced upon. These subsequent encounters were generally due to the carelessness of the operator; but, somehow, carelessness was inseparable from this particular "graft." The "confidence" men know no world

other than their favourite drinking bars, and so when "wanted" are easily run to earth.

Douglas was perfectly well aware of the risk attending the game and was not to be persuaded, but he did not give a definite refusal and the talk ended in his borrowing a sovereign from his old chum.

He was intensely disappointed the next day to find nothing in the papers about the "find" at Basingstoke and his disappointment was accentuated when the evening papers were equally barren. On the morrow he searched in vain and the suspense began to tell upon his nerves. He was restless and uneasy and he wanted someone to talk to—or, to be quite correct, someone to talk to him—a woman not a man. Jenny's frivolous prattle was not unamusing and he wired her to meet him at a little French restaurant in Soho where he had taken her several times.

"Two hours ought to be long enough for the little cat to dress herself in. At this time of the day she's like the rest of her set, always anyhow. I'll have a quiet smoke and a drink at the Café Royal."

He dispatched his wire and sat himself down to think. He had a reluctance to admit that the cause of his worry was Rookson, but it was useless to try to convince himself that it was not so. So much depended upon the fellow and so little dependence was to be placed on him.

"Now that I've done with the rat I should be a million times better without him. The devil of it is that I can't get rid of him as easily as I got rid of that moustache and suit of clothes."

At last he rose and strolled leisurely to Old Compton Street. Jenny was punctual—she always was where little dinners and lunches were concerned. She was blessed with a splendid appetite and a superb digestion. She was pretending to be interested in a shop and looked very fresh and attractive. She saw Douglas's reflection in the window and turned instantly.

"Hallo, chappie," was her unconventional greeting, "I was awfully glad to get your wire. I've had the blooming hump all the morning."

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing much, but it gives me the hump all the same. I'll tell you later on. Let's have a drink before we go into the caffy."

Douglas humoured her and though he was anxious to find out what had given Jenny the "hump," fearing it had something to do with Alicia, he did not question her. He knew Jenny's peculiarities thoroughly. If she were let alone she was bound to tell him everything in her own fashion.

"Ah, that's put me right," exclaimed the young lady, drawing a long breath, after emptying half a tumbler of Guinness, her favourite "pick-me-up" "I tell you straight, chappie, I couldn't get Jim Rookson out of my head. Thinking of him made me quite ratty. I fairly jumped down mother's throat when she began worrying me about having the mopes."

Douglas made no comment, not because it was his policy to be silent, but because of the mention of Rookson. It was an ugly coincidence that he and Jenny should be thinking of the man at the same time.

"Didn't you tell me that Jim never left his diggings?" she went on.

"Yes. He's under a bit of a cloud just now."

"Well, I'll swear I saw him yesterday sneaking along John Street, Adelphi. I don't know why, but it made me feel frightened, and, lest he should speak to me, I dived into Buckingham Court, and so into the Strand."

"All your fancy, Jenny. John Street's not more than five minutes from Scotland Yard. Do you think Rookson would venture to risk his carcase so near headquarters? Not he."

"All I can say is that if it wasn't Jim Rookson I saw it must have been his ghost."

"Oh, if it was his ghost, no wonder you had the hump," retorted Douglas banteringly. "Drink up your stout and lets get."

They made their way to the restaurant. Jenny did not notice that as they walked along her companion's eyes were glancing in every direction, as though he suspected he was being shadowed. The disquieting thought had flashed across his mind that Jenny might be right, and that the purpose which had sent Rookson into the neighbourhood of Scotland Yard was to give him away. Then he pooh-poohed the notion. It was too ridiculous. What grudge could Rookson have against him?

So when they were seated in the snug homely restaurant and Jenny commenced her chatter, his gloomy forebodings were dissipated.

"I had your wire at Basingstoke telling me Miss Montrose was still at Poynter's," said Douglas abruptly, cutting Miss Bassett short in the midst of

a sentence. "Have you anything to report about her?"

"No," rejoined Jenny indifferently. "Things are just the same and likely to be so. Miss Montrose is ill."

"What's the matter with her?" asked Douglas with a sudden interest which did not escape Jenny's sharp eyes.

"I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Why didn't you? I thought I told you I wanted to know everything. Has she had a doctor?"

"Really, I can't tell you. I daresay I can find out, but I had an idea that all you cared for was to be sure where she was so that the man you're working for could find her."

"That's right. I'm not finding fault. I only want to be ready with an answer in case my man should ask me any question. You'd better enquire about the woman's illness."

"All right, I'll go to Poynter's when I leave here. Shall I see you this evening?"

"Yes. Piccadilly Circus at nine."

"Good. I'll be there."

Douglas soon after paid the waiter, and rose—not altogether to Jenny's satisfaction. She would willingly have stayed all the afternoon at the restaurant, smoking cigarettes, sipping black coffee and brandy, and playing dominoes, had Douglas been at all companionable. But a sombre mood had come over him. Jenny made one or two efforts to be amusing—she prided herself on her ability to talk a man into a good humour—and then gave up

with a muttered: "Oh, bother! If you can't be sociable you can do the other thing."

"I say, chappie, have you a dollar you don't want?" whispered the young lady, when they were outside. "I'm down to my last *sou*."

Douglas pinched his lips. The moment was not propitious for the request. However, he did not refuse. He put half-a-crown into her hand

"That's all I can spare at present," said he.

"T'aint much if you'v got to treat a pal. I don't get people to talk and tell me things without spending money."

"I know—I know," he retorted. "I'll make it all right for you to-night."

Jenny went off looking a little glum and Douglas strode in another direction. He felt intensely irritable and was glad the girl was gone. Had they been together much longer he might have said something which would have led to a quarrel, and to quarrel with Jenny would be as foolish a thing as he could do.

In Oxford Street he bought an evening paper and eagerly scanned its columns. But the edition was an early one and contained nothing which concerned him.

Now that he was so near the practical development of the plot he had been so laboriously building up, Douglas felt a nervousness which was new to him. The silence of the evening paper seemed ominous. Had anything gone wrong? Surely enough had been said in the "Crown Inn" about the pocket-book and its contents to reach the ears of some local newspaper man, who would know the importance of the story, and who would take care

to wire it immediately to one of the London news agencies. It was incredible, in these days of insatiable thirst for sensation, that there should be so much delay.

However, there it was, and he would have to wait until the five o'clock edition appeared. He had two hours before him and nothing to do with his time. Once more Rookson came into his mind. He ought to look the fellow up to make sure all was going right, but he had conceived a violent antipathy to Jim. He could not just now screw himself up to the pitch of an interview. Besides he knew Rookson would want money, and he had none at the moment that he could spare.

So he continued to walk aimlessly about the streets until he could buy a copy of the paper he wanted. At last he heard the juvenile squeak of "five o'clock edition! All the winnahs!" and he called to the urchin. When he saw the heading: "The Winchester Murder" in large type, his hand trembled so much that he could hardly keep his eyes fixed on the print. However, he gradually recovered himself and by degrees read the report. Neither the text of the letter nor that of the will was given, but it was stated that both were of extreme interest to Miss Alicia Montrose, "the young lady who figured so prominently in the case."

The report contained a resume of the story to assist the sluggish memories of newspaper readers and the writer went on to say: "We have reason to believe that when the terms of the will and the letter are made known, an all-absorbing romance will be revealed of which the public at present have only had the first chapter."

"The first chapter?" muttered Douglas with a grim smile. "Not quite, I fancy."

Then his eyes flashed. At the end of the report was a statement which made him thrill to his finger tips. "It is estimated," he read, "that the late Mr. Haggar left behind him a fortune of upwards of a million. His solicitors have, of course, been going into his affairs, and should the genuineness of the will be established, Miss Alicia may be congratulated on her good luck."

"Alicia's good luck? What about mine?"

Douglas folded the paper and thrust it into his pocket. Upwards of a million! He repeated the words over and over again. His nervousness was gone. The prospect of wealth was staggering and he strode along at a rapid pace, indifferent as to where he went. It was quite an hour before his nerves were completely under control, and he then found himself in a neighbourhood quite new to him. He had reached Hammersmith, as, on enquiry, he discovered.

Hammersmith was not far from Shepherd's Bush where, according to Jenny's information, Alicia proposed living. Jenny had given Douglas the address, and it occurred to him that it might be well to know where the house was situated. He was some time before he found it, and he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously when he saw the shabby genteel, depressing road, typical of the suburbs of thirty years ago. When the houses were built, bay windows, breakfast parlours, and a flight of stone steps leading to a door within a stucco portico, were in favour. Most of the houses had a mournful, neglected aspect; those which were

empty had been so for some time, judging by the weather-stained boards announcing the fact ; many of the occupied ones had apartment cards in the windows. It was a decaying neighbourhood.

" Fancy a woman entitled to a million coming to live in this shoddy slum," thought Douglas. " I wonder if she'll alter her mind when she knows what's happened."

Uneasy thoughts just then seemed to pass through his mind. He slackened his pace and his eyes were fixed on the pavement. Soon after his brow cleared.

" No," he muttered, " I shall have no difficulty with Alicia. Just to keep me quiet she'll agree to anything I suggest. The thing's very simple. I don't want every penny. I should be quite contented with a quarter of her fortune."

He walked back to town his mind fixed upon Alicia. Success was centred in what she would do and, for the time being, he would have to act the part of a spectator. Of course, the first thing for the lawyers would be to establish the genuineness of the documents. Perry and Latimer would advertise for Jenny Bassett and Jim Rookson, and here would come the real test of his daring plot. Douglas was perfectly certain Jenny would go through the ordeal without breaking down or contradicting herself, and the same might be said of Rookson. But with regard to Rookson there was a difficulty. Jim could swear black was white with the most convincing air, but suppose Perry and Latimer were to insist upon investigating his record ?

" That's the crux. If the police are once called

in I'm done for. Jim's a cur ; if there's a hitch he'll think only of himself. But I won't bother about him to-night. Time enough when I see breakers ahead."

At nine o'clock he met Jenny at Piccadilly Circus and he asked her if she'd found out if Alicia were really ill.

"There's nothing much the matter," said Jenny pettishly. "A feverish cold, 'flu,' or something like that. I've had a rather rotten time, chappie, I think you might take me somewhere."

And in one of the "halls of dazzling delight," of which London has an ample variety, Douglas spent all the money he had. This did not trouble him. He was in the mood to trust to his luck and good luck generally responded when he was down to his last penny.

CHAPTER XIX

FATHER AND SON

SIR GEORGE GRAYDON was in a bad temper. He had, as children would say, got out of bed the wrong side that morning. But a more reasonable explanation was that he had assisted at a public dinner the night before; he had made a speech and had worked himself into a nervous flurry in consequence, and his old enemy, the gout, had taken a mean advantage of his weakness. He had had a bad night and mingled with his twinges of pain were aggravating reflections concerning his son. Luckily he had his man, Simpson, to storm at, and this, in a way, acted as a counter irritant, and so was beneficial.

Simpson had long since discovered that the best way to deal with his master was to stand up to him. The encounters generally took the same form a fit of bellowing and blustering followed by a grumph jocosity when the tempest had quite subsided. This morning, however, when the city magnate limped into the snug room, where breakfast was awaiting him, the period of jocosity had not arrived, and his relations with Simpson were still rather strained.

A pile of correspondence was on the table; for the most part consisting of long, bulky envelopes, containing prospectuses of new companies, and half yearly reports of old ones, and other matters of

a purely business nature. Sir George was in no humour for business just now, and he sipped his coffee and munched his toast and eggs gloomily. Simpson hovered about the room as silent and as noiseless as a ghost. As usual, after one of his tornadoes, Sir George was the first to speak.

"This cursed gout's still giving me beans. I don't know whether to send for Sir Roper Parker or not."

"I'd wait for an hour and see if it goes off," said Simpson quite calmly.

"Goes off? What do you mean? Gout isn't a squib or a rocket."

"No, Sir George. It would be a good thing if it was. You'd have done with it the first burst."

"Ever had the gout?"

"No, Sir George."

"Then don't talk rot."

"Must say something, I suppose. If I didn't you'd call me insolent."

"And in nine cases out of ten I shouldn't be far wrong. I'll 'phone to Parker after breakfast."

"Very well, Sir George. I won't forget to remind you."

"Remind me? By Jove, the gout'll do that."

Simpson sniggered. Sir George, as he well knew, was like certain judges who are always trying to be funny. They expect laughter to follow their efforts and elevate their inanities into witticisms. Simpson's giggle completely restored Sir George's good humour.

"Pass the *Times*, Simpson. Anything startling this morning? I guess you've gone through the news?"

"Yes, Sir George."

"Ha! It's like your confounded impudence. Don't you know it always spoils the freshness of news to know that somebody's been nibbling at the paper before you?"

"Yes, Sir George. I suppose that's why I do it. But it's useful sometimes. Prevents things coming upon one too sudden-like. I once lived with a gentleman who always told me to look at the paper first before I gave it him. Suffered from heart disease, and was awfully nervous lest he should have a shock."

"Shocks don't trouble me, and I'm not nervous. *I* haven't got heart disease."

"One never knows, Sir George. I believe it's a most insidious complaint. It don't come out like measles."

Sir George having fired off his one jocosity was not prepared with another. By this time he was buried in the *Times*, and was thus able to administer a snub to his man by ignoring his attempt at a witticism. Suddenly a long, low whistle came from behind the paper.

"By Jove!"—another whistle—"did you see this, Simpson, about the Winchester murder?"

"Yes, Sir George."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Thought you'd like to read it for yourself. Didn't want to spoil the freshness."

Simpson was bent upon getting his own back, but his retort was lost. His master was absorbed in reading an account of the last sensation—the discovery of Mr. Haggar's alleged will. By this time a pertinacious "special correspondent," by a

method known only to the journalistic fraternity, had managed to get from the police a copy of both the letter and the will and had made the most of them.

"They've purposely kept Mr. Eric's name out of the business this time, Sir George," said Simpson, lingering over the process of clearing away.

"Of course—of course," rejoined Sir George hastily. "He's done with it—unless the murderer is captured. In that case there'll be the magisterial examination and afterwards the trial; and no doubt Mr. Eric will be called as a witness."

"He can't say no more than what he told the coroner, I suppose, Sir George."

"No, certainly not."

Again Sir George's eyes went to the paper and his lips moved. He was one of those slow witted persons who must form every word as they read. Sight alone is not enough.

Simpson was not surprised at the unusual attention Sir George was giving to the *Times*. Naturally the Winchester murder had a strong personal interest for him. The man continued to talk because he knew his master liked to know his opinion of things. Sir George was not quick at grasping the point of matters other than those relating to the movements of the Stock Exchange, and his chats with Simpson after breakfast was very valuable to him. Simpson had lived in the "best families" and could always throw interesting sidelights upon any scandal in high life which might happen to be the topic of the day.

"If it's true what the paper says, the young lady'll be one of the richest women in the country.

She'll be showered with offers of marriage. It's a rum thing how many men are ready to marry a woman directly her name gets in the papers, and she's talked about. It doesn't seem to matter whether she's good or bad, does it, sir? If Miss Alicia Montrose had really murdered the poor old gent I do believe she'd have the men after her all the same. There'll be some excuse for 'em though in Miss Montrose's case. She's very striking looking at least so I should think by her photos. Photos don't always flatter, do they, sir—leastways snapshots don't. Mr. Eric's was quite a carryacachaw."

Sir George did not look over pleased. The remembrance of the reproductions of the snapshots of Eric and Alicia in the *Scorpion* and the *Scorpion's* remarks thereon still rankled.

"Look here, Simpson," he snapped, "I want to get to work. I wish you'd finish what you're doing and clear out."

"Yes, Sir George."

Simpson said not another word. He was shrewd enough to know when he might talk and when he might not.

When the man was gone Sir George stood for some minutes in front of the fire swaying himself on his toes and heels. He had forgotten his gout which sometimes had the peculiarity of being only bad when he thought of it. The details of Haggar's will had given him a pleasurable sensation. The mere mention of a million of money always impressed him. He hoped one day to be a millionaire. It was his ambition. At present he was not even a "six figure" man, though very near it. There seemed to him to be something about a round

million which conferred upon the possessor a k of superiority. To die worth only £100,000 was o nothing particularly noticeable. But add a nought and you were at once elevated into another plane.

The standard of a man's merit while in this world, from Sir George's point of view, depended upon the amount of money he left behind when he went out of it. How this odd notion was to be justified Sir George did not know, nor did it trouble him, especially just now, faced as he was by the hard fact that if all was true which the *Times* said, Alicia Montrose was worth a million. Now it was unquestionable that a woman with her pockets empty became quite a different creature when those pockets were full. A million! It almost took his breath away.

"H'm. I wonder if Eric knew anything," he grunted, as he walked to the table and commenced opening his letters.

The second one he took up was in his son's handwriting. He tore the envelope impatiently. Only once had Eric written since their interview at the Cottage Hospital and this was when he was at Brighton. Not a word, however, had he said as to the purpose which had taken him thither and his father naturally imagined he had gone to recuperate.

"Dear father," the letter ran, "I shall be calling upon you before eleven. If you should be out will you leave word where I can see you in the city? Yours affectionately, Eric."

"What's in the wind, I wonder?" grumbled Sir George. "Money wanted? Hardly. I will say this for the lad that he rarely exceeds his allowance. But then it's a jolly liberal one and I haven't ut

him short in spite of his going dead against me. I don't know what I might have done but for that nasty mishap of his at Uxbridge. He made no secret of the fact that he went there to see the woman with the eyes. He *must* have known a thing or two . . . . . At the same time he might have given me a hint that there was a possibility of her coming into a fortune. I'll tackle him on the subject when he comes, but I shall have to do it gingerly. He has a beastly habit of flying in one's face about nothing."

The subject of Alicia had certainly become a most engrossing one. Sir George took up the *Times* and once more went through the report. Then he put the paper down, but did not proceed with his letters; he sat pondering, his legs crossed, his thumbs in his waistcoat armholes. He was so deeply absorbed that he quite started when Simpson tapped at the door and announced "Mr. Eric."

English fathers and sons are not demonstrative in their greetings; and Sir George and Eric were no exceptions to the rule. At the same time there was a little more feeling in Sir George's tone than he usually showed.

"Why haven't you looked me up before?" said he, when Eric had put dutiful enquiries as to his father's health. "I should have called at Jermyn Street, but 'pon my word I didn't quite know how I should be received."

"My dear father!" remonstrated Eric.

"It's a fact. I won't say it didn't occur to me that it was *your* duty to make the first advance, but we'll let that pass. Quite recovered from the effects of that dastardly attack, eh?"

"Quite, thanks."

"Ah, nothing like the Brighton air. Always makes me feel twenty per cent. better. I don't think, though, that you're looking particularly fit. You'd better take a long rest. South of France, Nice, even Monte Carlo, provided you keep from plunging. You certainly want a change."

"Well, I feel that too. In fact it's just what has brought me here this morning."

"Want a cheque, eh, for the exes? Don't open your mouth too wide that's all, and I'll see what I can do."

"I'm not wishing to put you to any expense. It's rather the other way about. I want you to get me something to do—a post of some kind I don't care much what it is."

Sir George threw himself back in his chair and stared blankly at his son. Had Eric asked for the moon he could not have been more taken aback.

"What—on—earth—is—this—new—craze?" at last he enquired, with a pause and an emphatic nod between each word.

"I don't see much that's crazy in the notion. Seems to me to be jolly good sense. I'm sick of doing nothing. I want to employ my time and keep my mind occupied."

"That's all right enough, and if you hadn't money to enjoy yourself with I should agree with you, *but*."

Sir George's thumbs went to his armholes, always his relief when at a loss for arguments or for words, and his mouth remained open for some six seconds before he spluttered out—"what I mean to say is that you had your chance of plenty of occupation at Slumpington and you didn't take it. That's

absolutely gone—absolutely. Hargrave wrote me that the party wouldn't wait any longer, and as you weren't available the Association had selected another candidate."

Sir George's voice and manner suddenly assumed unwonted solemnity. Eric, however, was not impressed.

"The best thing it could do," said he. "I should have been a failure. Besides, for the reasons I gave you when we discussed the question, it was impossible for me to run on the lines you and Hargrave laid down. But that business is dead and buried unless"—an odd smile went over the young man's face—"you let me go my own way and take my stand on my own politics."

"You can have what politics you please so long as you don't publicly proclaim them. It would do me great damage with the party—what I mean is that it's absolutely vital that I should be in their best books just now. The fact is—but for the moment the thing's a secret and I must beg of you not to say a word—I've been asked to stand for Slumpington, and I've accepted."

"I congratulate you on your decision, and I heartily wish you success," rejoined Eric, and he held out his hand which his father took, in a manner which was a mixture of importance and shamefacedness.

"Thanks my boy. I must say that the requisition which has been presented me is most gratifying and flattering—absolutely so. It's been signed by all the best people in the place. But you know as well as I do that a requisition, however numerously and influentially signed, can't, by itself, win an election

When it's publicly announced that I'm really coming forward the real work'll begin. I don't mind telling you, Eric, that I'm a bit nervous over the confounded speech-making, and—by Jove, I've an idea! You said just now that you wanted something to do. Now I think I can give you a job, that is, if you care to take it on. Here's the notion write my speeches for me, and give me a few tips how to make my points. That's the secret of speech-making, I'm convinced—making your points what do you say?"

"My dear pater, what's the good of my writing your speeches? You don't want to be talking what you call Socialism, do you?"

"Heaven forbid! Of course, I know well enough your opinions aren't mine—worse luck—but you don't follow me. I don't want any of your pernicious sentiments, of course. What you'd do for me would be common-sense, safe stuff that no one could say a word against. No details you know—no definite policy——"

"Hedging in fact," put in Eric slily. "Some call it sitting on the fence."

"You can call it what you like but it's the line our leaders go upon. They never bind themselves to anything when matters are topsy-turvy as they are now. Anyway I should think you could work out something of that sort for me"

"I'm not sure. There are two ways of writing a speech of that kind You can say nothing and mean anything, or you can mean nothing and say anything. Which do you prefer?"

"Something between the two. Look here I want a speech which says nothing and means less. It

must read well you know. I'm not going to trust to reporters taking down my blunders and putting 'em right the wrong way. Not me. What I mean to say is I'll have every blessed word in print and slips given to the papers. And I'll look through what the editors mean to put in, and cut out anything I don't like. That's how things are done in the city with reports of company meetings, and the best way, too. You just write a colourless, non-committal speech, and Hargrave and I'll put in the party plums afterwards. That won't hurt your conscience will it?—though what conscience has got to do with politics dashed if I know."

"To oblige you, I'll try and do something of the kind. But I may tell you it doesn't meet my idea of getting something to occupy me permanently."

"What's your idea then? Business?"

"Yes. Why not? You've spent all your life in the city and you've done very well, I suppose."

"I can't grumble, but it's just because I've done well that I've been able to bring you up as a gentleman. You're not cut out for a man of business—what I mean is that if you wish to take up anything you'd better go in for the bar."

"I've thought of that and perhaps it's the best thing; but preparing for the bar is an expensive affair."

"Hang the expense. The bar's a gentlemanly profession and a jolly good paying game if once you get to the top of the tree. But—"

Again Sir George sought the relief of his waistcoat armholes; but for once they failed him; he could say nothing more.

The fact was while he had been talking with his

son he had had Alicia, " the woman with the eyes," in his mind. He had expected Eric would have alluded to her in some way and his son's silence puzzled him. Then a brilliant solution of the puzzle occurred to him. Had Eric proposed to her ? Had she accepted him and was he casting about for something to do to enable him to support a wife without coming upon his father ?

" If once you get to the top of the tree," repeated Eric. " Yes. But it isn't easy to get there."

" Easy ? Nor is it easy to make a million off your own bat. But what's to be the end of going to the bar ? Money or marriage ? "

" Marriage ? Not exactly. What on earth's put that into your head ? "

Sir George elevated his eyebrows and with his thumbs still in his armholes twiddled his fingers.

" You've altered your mind then ? " said he

" Altered my mind ? I don't understand you."

" Oh, come, come, you needn't pretend to be so innocent. Look here I hate beating about the bush. It's not the way to do business. What of the girl you were sweet upon—Alicia Something or the other ? I suppose you meant to marry her or you wouldn't have made such a fuss when I pointed out what I thought at the time was your folly. I've reason now to think otherwise "

" I'm glad you've changed your opinion of Miss Montrose

" Humph, to hear you speak one would hardly think you were. Has anything happened ? Have you found out she's not all you thought she was ? "

" Certainly not. I haven't changed the least in my feelings towards her. I've the highest respect

for Miss Montrose, and I've great sympathy for her in her terrible position."

"What terrible position? Have you seen to-day's papers?"

"Yes."

"You don't call the possibility of coming into a fortune of a million terrible do you?"

"I wasn't thinking of that."

"No? It seems to me to be absolutely the very thing you *should* think about. What I mean to say is that if you're really contemplating marrying her I shan't throw any obstacle in the way."

"You're very good but there's no question of a marriage. Practically we've parted."

"Quarrelled?"

"No. I think we still remain friends."

"Dashed if I understand you young men." exclaimed his father irritably. "In my time when a man fell in love he let the girl know it and his people too; they married and settled down and and there you were. Now-a-days you shilly shally—one day you appear to be sweethearts, the next day you're only friends. The day after that she goes out with another man, and the fourth day she comes back to you. There's nothing doing and finally you spring a surprise on your family and friends and announce you're going to marry some other girl nobody's ever heard of."

Under other circumstances Eric would have laughed at his father's summary of love affairs from the old fashioned suburban point of view, but he was in no mood for jesting. So he said tartly

"You needn't be afraid that I shall make an ass of myself that way. If you can't help me to what I want—that is something to work at—I'd better think out something for myself. I fancy if I gave up my digs at Jermyn Street, got rid of Davis and dropped some of my expensive friends I might venture upon the bar. But that depends upon your continuing my allowance. You've been very good to me but I sometimes wish you'd put me to a practical occupation. Don't think I'm grumbling, because I'm not. I only want to be independent."

"You're talking absolute nonsense. Who *is* independent. Your Socialist who's always preaching about equality?"

"Which he doesn't do."

"Never mind. Take thieves, tramps, and vagabonds generally. Their game is to be free of the law but what happens? They sometimes know what slavery is—picking oakum for instance. What I mean to say is *I* don't call myself independent, although as far as my actual wants are concerned I need never do another stroke of work absolutely. But what have I got to do? I've to *kotoo* to this person and that person; subscribe to things I don't care a damn about; dress for dinner, a thing I loath—absolutely—and I try to imagine Simpson's my servant, whereas he's my master absolutely. Coming to you and your affairs; as I read the thing this Miss Montrose you were sweet upon—you needn't contradict me because I know better—is likely to be one of the richest young women in the kingdom. Do you mean to tell me you're going to throw away a chance like that?"

"What chance?"

"Of securing a big prize in the marriage market. I admit I said some nasty things about her, but they were based absolutely on what I read in the *Scorpion*, and everybody knows that the rag'll print any lie that'll help to sell it. What I mean to say is that at that time your name being mixed up with an unpleasant business had a delirious—I mean a deleterious effect on your political career and I felt then it was my duty to open my mouth. But that's all over now. As for the photos—my goodness, it doesn't do to be too sensitive about that kind of annoyance. Don't we live to-day in a perpetual searchlight?"

"If I recollect rightly you took a different view some weeks ago."

"Circumstances have changed. Mind you, I don't blame you for being cautious. But as you haven't quarrelled with Miss Montrose there's nothing to prevent you getting back on the old footing. But you'll have to be smart. If this business of the will turns out to be *bonny fide* fortune hunters'll be round her like flies buzzing about a sugar cask."

"If it were possible I'd like to forget her. Anyhow I'm going to have a good try. But it's very certain we don't think alike so I must go my own way. Don't hesitate to tell me if this idea of mine forces you to make any change—I mean in regard to my allowance."

Sir George glared helpessly at his son. The wind was completely taken out of his sails. Eric's stoical attitude was another proof of the topsy turvydom of the times. In the old days when there was a possibility of being cut off with a shilling, the

son if he did not go down on his knees and beg forgiveness, was defiant, and went off and enlisted. But so far as Sir George could see the prospect of being penniless had no terrors for Eric. The matter was further complicated by the fact that the very fault he had accused his son of committing he had himself been guilty of. If anything could be called vacillating it was his own views towards Alicia Montrose. Perhaps some conviction of this kind had seized him, for a look of embarassment went over his face.

"No, I shan't make any change," said he hesitatingly. "At the same time you'd better turn over in your mind what I've suggested. Of course there may be nothing in the story of the will. The newspapers are quite capable of inventing fairy tales. Shouldn't wonder if to-morrow we saw a contradiction of the whole thing."

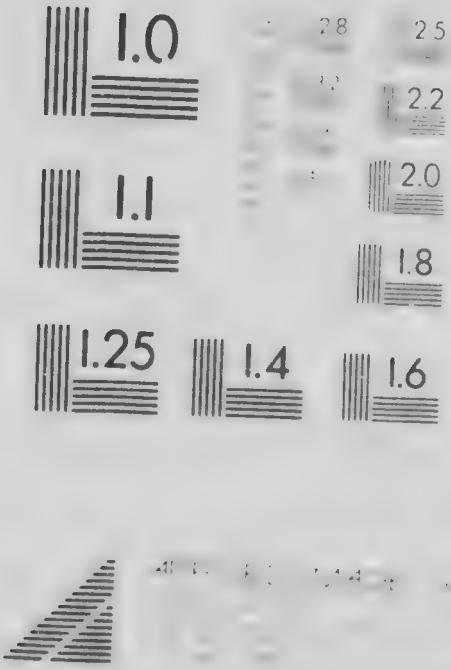
"That's quite possible," said Eric, shrugging his shoulders. "In the meantime as you're dead against my following your example, and going into the city, I'll look up St. Maur and have a talk with him about ways and means of reading for the bar. He was called last year and he knows the ropes. Once more let me hope you'll score a win at Slumpington. You shall have something in the way of a speech in a day or two."

"My dear boy! Now that's common sense."

"Upon my word," reflected Sir George when Eric had departed, "I believe I've got a better chance with the Slumpington people than Eric would have had. "A practical business man, the architect of his own fortune" and all that sort of thing always goes down well with the masses. He's

more like themselves than your bookish, high-falutin dreamer—absolutely. That's what's the matter with the lad. He's had no experience of roughing it. Well I can't well blame him for that. I wonder what's the truth of the matter between him and the girl? What a rum chap. Didn't turn a hair when I suggested he might marry a million of money. Anyhow he must go his own way. I don't regret I've made him a gentleman."

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART



CHAPTER XX

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

FULL of his resolution to devote himself to his new aim in life, Eric determined to think of nothing else. As for Alicia she had passed out of his life—so he told himself.

"If she comes into the possession of David Haggar's wealth it will add a chapter to an unfinished romance; but a fortune's hardly likely to mean peace and quietness while her raffish husband's pursuing her," he thought. "But what has it to do with me? The sooner I brush the whole business out of my mind the better."

He went down to the Temple, looked up St. Maur, lunched with him, and the barrister went back with his friend to Jermyn Street. The talk with St. Maur had given him a very fair idea of what lay before him if he carried out his plan of reading for the bar.

"Letter for you, sir—just come," said Davis when he entered his rooms.

Eric glanced at the envelope. It was uninteresting commercial, and the writing was stiff and cramped. He threw it on the table impatiently. Some of his debts were long standing, and, apparently, a creditor had lost patience, and had put the matter in the hands of his solicitor. He took no notice of the letter, but sat himself down to go through with St. Maur a list of the books which he

would want for his preliminary studies in law. They would make a hole in a five pound note. His banker's pass-book told him that his balance was reduced to about that amount, and his quarter's allowance was not due for another week.

"Don't let a five pound note stand in your way. I guess I'm good enough for that," said St. Maur.

"Thanks old man, but one of my new resolutions is not to increase my liabilities. I mean to pay ready money for everything."

"Splendid; but the drawback to paying ready money is that you want such a deuce of a lot of capital to start with. How much have you got?"

"Nothing at present. I shall have to wait till my cheque comes along. In the meantime I can get the books I want at the British Museum Library, I suppose."

"Of course. The Museum's jolly handy, but cramming in that distracting reading-room isn't the same thing as having the books in your own digs. I never could do any real work at the Museum. Still you might make a beginning there."

"I don't see any other way. The fact is, old chap, I owe a devil of a lot of money one way and another, and some of the next cheque must go to satisfy the most clamorous of my creditors."

"What's the amount of your debts?"

"Haven't the least idea. Davis knows more about them than I do."

He sounded the electric bell and Davis appeared.

"How much do I owe?"

"I can't tell you off-hand, sir. I've all the accounts that have been sent in, but there's more to come."

"No doubt. Anyhow bring what you have. I'm going to turn over a new leaf. No more credit, mind. You'll pay for everything as you go."

"Yes, sir."

Davis felt inclined to smile, but he kept a straight face. He had heard this announcement before—not, indeed, from his present master, but from others. He fetched a number of bills from an adjoining room.

"Are all these unpaid?" asked Graydon with a look of dismay.

"Yes, sir."

"By Jove—almost a year's income."

He went through the pile. Many of the bills were records of folly—flowers, trinkets, perfumes, sixteen button gloves among others. One invoice made him open his eyes. It was for purchases made at an expensive establishment in Bond Street. Among a list of articles of ladies' wearing apparel, insignificant in nature and uses, but not insignificant in price, was a silk blouse charged at ten guineas. He tossed the bill over to St. Maur, who laughed when he saw the items.

"That's the bill little Esmé Warrender ran up when I took her to Ascot last year," Eric explained ruefully, "confound her cheek. I told her distinctly I couldn't afford the blouse. The little cat must have gone to the shop afterwards and had it put down to my account with the rest, thinking I shouldn't notice it. I can't get out of paying. Perhaps I ought to thank my lucky stars it's no worse."

"It's all off between you and her isn't it?"

"Rather. She'd ruin me in six months. A South African millionaire's more her form."

Altogether, with what he owed his tailor, his hosier, his hatter, his wine merchant, his cigar dealer, and others, together with the keep of his polo ponies, and the hire of motor-cars, his debts amounted to over £300, and his allowance was £500 a year.

"Teddy, do you remember what Sydney Smith said about paying ready money?"

"Can't say that I do."

"His advice was always do it—because it's such a check upon the imagination. The sooner I start the better. To begin with I'm going to give up these chambers."

"I thought they suited you down to the ground."

"So they do, but they cost too much. I'm thinking of living in some quiet country place where I shan't be interrupted."

"You won't like it. I should have thought—excuse me for saying so—that what happened the last time you went out of town would have spoiled you for the country."

Graydon pinched his lips together. He wished St. Maur had not brought the unpleasant Uxbridge episode to his mind, when he was doing all he could to crush everything that bore the remotest degree upon his association with Alicia.

"A thing of that sort doesn't happen twice to the same person," he rejoined. "At all events whether I decide upon a country or a town life I intend to exchange these diggings for something much cheaper. How the deuce am I to get rid of that burden," pointing to the pile of bills, "unless I make an effort to retrench? Already some of the beggars are getting nasty. Here's number one."

He took up the commercial-looking letter with the stiff formal handwriting.

"It doesn't matter whom this is from. I know very well there'll be the usual 'we are instructed to' do something unpleasant, in it."

He tossed the letter on the table. It fell with the flap side uppermost, and he caught sight of the name "Perry and Latimer." He hesitated a moment; then, with an "excuse me old chap," he took up the letter again and opened it.

"Dear sir," it ran, "we shall be greatly obliged if you will call upon us at your earliest convenience. We wish to confer with you in reference to Miss Montrose. You have doubtless seen the statement in the papers that the late Mr. Haggar's will has been found. Yours obediently, Perry and Latimer."

Do what he would to get free from the bonds which his acquaintance with Alicia had cast about him, it was clear that escape was not so easy as he imagined. He handed the letter to St. Maur, who read it and handed it back without a word of comment.

"Well, you say nothing," remarked Graydon. "What do you think?"

"What's the good of my thinking? Everyone must manage his affairs in his own fashion. All I need say is that by Perry and Latimer writing you they evidently imagine you're still interested in the lady—and I should think they were right."

"In a way, yes, and, in spite of the fact that we've agreed to say good-bye."

St. Maur went on smoking his cigarette quietly. It is the way of men when they talk of love affairs

to observe reticence." The confidant listens and says nothing unless he's asked directly for his opinion, and even then his language is guarded. With women it is different. They are all curiosity, and never scruple to ask questions and proffer superfluous advice, generally in the form of stating what *they* would do under similar circumstances.

"Yes," said Graydon, his eyes fixed steadily on the fire. "There was nothing else to be done but say good-bye."

St. Maur nodded.

"There were reasons—powerful reasons—which made a parting imperative."

"My dear chap you needn't take the trouble to justify either yourself or Miss Montrose. As the affair's ended nothing more need be said."

"I'm not sure it *is* ended. Perry and Latimer's letter seems to suggest new complications. To make a confession to you, Teddy, why I'm anxious to take up a profession is because I want to keep my mind fixed on matters other than those concerning Miss Montrose; and so prevent my making a fool of myself."

"It's as well to avoid doing *that*—if you can," rejoined St. Maur drily. "But in such a matter as love, foolishness doesn't always depend upon oneself. The unknown quantity—woman—has to be reckoned with. In your case, no doubt, the circumstances were exceptional. It must be deuced unpleasant to have the newspapers trotting you out as a valuable asset at every available opportunity. The discovery of the supposed will, for instance, at Basingstoke. Of course you've noticed that the whole story of the murder has been raked up and in

some of the accounts your name hasn't been forgotten."

"I know, but I didn't read any of them. I'm sick of the whole thing."

"That, of course, I can understand. But supposing the girl came into a big fortune wouldn't that make a difference in your views?"

"Not an atom," snapped Graydon. "Some day, Teddy, when the affair has taken its place in the long list of unsolved mysteries, I'll tell you the story of Alicia Montrose, so far as I know it. She's as much a problem to me as anybody. But at the present moment I'm dumb. Don't let's talk any more about it. What shall we do? Stroll to the club and have a game at 'snooker?' I don't know a better way of distracting one's thoughts than 'snooker.' There's a lot of human nature about the game. It proves the truth of the maxim that there's 'something in the misfortune of our dearest friends that,' etcetera, etcetera."

St. Maur had no objection and the two whiled away an hour until dinner time, but Graydon, usually a capital "snooker" player, did not show his customary form. Truth to tell he was thinking more about Alicia than of getting his adversary into difficulties.

"Sorry to trouble you Mr. Graydon," said Perry the next morning when Eric called, "but the fact is we're in a difficulty. We want to know where Miss Montrose is to be found. She seems to have gone from Vine Cottage, but we haven't had a line from her to notify us of her change of address. We thought perhaps you might give us some information."

"Why should you think that? I know no more about Miss Montrose than you do."

"But you went down to Uxbridge to see her—at least so we assumed by the dastardly attack made upon you in that neighbourhood. May I congratulate you on your recovery? By the way have the police got upon the track of the ruffians yet?

"I believe not."

"Did you call at Vine Cottage?"

"Not until I was well enough to leave the hospital. I was then told that Miss Montrose had gone to Brighton."

"Yes, that was what we also ascertained but the information was too vague to act upon. We preferred writing to you. We had very early news of the pocketbook being found. The police, seeing our name mentioned in Mr. Haggar's strange letter, wired us and I went down at once to Basingstoke. I saw the letter and the will which apparently are in the late Mr. Haggar's handwriting but the authorities would not give them up until they had been seen by the Scotland Yard people, and I had to content myself with copies. Scotland Yard promises I shall have possession of the originals in the course of to-day and then we shall be able to probe into the matter. In the meantime it is of the greatest importance that we should see Miss Montrose."

"I don't doubt it."

Mr. Perry had long ago summed up the position of affairs between Gravdon and Alicia and he was rather surprised at his visitor's indifference. Unless they had quarrelled surely it would have been but

human had the young man shown some interest in the fact that the lady whom he had a good chance of winning was likely to be in possession of a huge fortune. But, so far as the lawyer could see, Graydon was quite unconcerned.

"Do I gather that you haven't seen or had any communication with Miss Montrose since she left Vine Cottage?" said Mr. Perry.

"I met her once by accident near Charing Cross, and the probability is that she may be staying at some hotel or boarding-house in the neighbourhood."

"Then she didn't give you her address?"

"No, nor did I ask her for it."

"Pardon me for putting these questions. Did you have any conversation with Miss Montrose about Mr. Haggar's will?"

"Certainly not. It's quite a week since I saw her and the will hadn't been found then. I'm afraid I can't help you any further," said Graydon rising.

"Just one moment, Mr. Graydon—are you likely to see Miss Montrose again?"

"Quite impossible for me to say."

"Should you do so may I ask you to write us? Of course there is a chance of our hearing from her direct. As the will and the letter have been published she may see them in the papers and no doubt if so she'll write or call."

"And if she doesn't, what then?"

"The matter remains where it is. We must have her instructions. But the first thing to do is to satisfy ourselves that the will's genuine and we can't do that until we have the documents in our

possession. It would have saved a good deal of trouble if poor Mr. Haggar had entrusted us with the matter but I suspect by the date of the letter that he only made up his mind at the last moment and had not time to call. As it is we've not only to find the legatee but the witnesses as well. I've made enquiries at the Empress Hotel and find that both the man and the woman have left. Advertisements asking them to come here appeared in this morning's papers. Perhaps you saw them."

Eric Graydon stood slowly dangling his umbrella. He had one or two questions in his mind he would like to ask the lawyer but he was uncertain how to frame them lest it should be thought he was actuated by mercenary motives.

"Look here, Mr. Perry," said he at last, "supposing the will turns out to be genuine——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Graydon," interposed the solicitor putting the mouthpiece of the flexible speaking tube to his ear. The whistle had sounded. "Yes?"

Graydon had his eyes fixed on Perry's face and saw it change at the message which had come from the outer office.

"A most extraordinary piece of luck Mr. Graydon," exclaimed Perry. "Miss Montrose has called. Would you like to see her?"

"No. I'd better not."

"Very well," rejoined the lawyer in a tone of surprise. "You know your own business best."

"What I *should* like to do, Mr. Perry, would be to call again in about an hour's time. I don't want to know anything about the business you and Miss Montrose may have to discuss. It isn't that at all.

She was not looking well the last time I saw her, and I'm anxious to know how she is. And," he added hesitatingly, "I daresay you can guess from her looks whether she's worried—I don't imagine she's likely to tell you—I should be glad to hear what you think. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly." Mr. Perry glanced at Graydon enquiringly and added: "As you'd rather not see the lady I'd better let you out at my private door.

So for the next hour Graydon paced up and down the quiet reposeful walk of Gray's Inn Gardens between Warwick Court and Theobald's Road. He was greatly agitated and his mind was torn by doubts. The love he was trying to kill had suddenly sprung to life and it seemed useless to struggle with it any longer.

Undoubtedly he was in a dilemma. According to Alicia he was in "danger." She was anxious about his "safety." Her fears could only point to one person—the man whom she had said she had married. But if he were in danger from the fellow what about herself?

It was this apprehension concerning her alone which had made him acquiesce in her earnest entreaty that they should say good-bye. Since then he had tormented himself as to whether he had done right. Ought he to have left her to the tender mercies of a scoundrel to whom, unhappily, she was bound by law? Was not chivalry, was not humanity, higher than a legal tie where there was no love? Was not the "sacredness" of marriage a delusion, a tradition of the past, when priests reigned supreme? If two people liked to regard their marriage from this point of view let them do

so by all means, but apart from personal considerations there was nothing sacred about the marriage tie, or why should register offices be established?

Anyway, Graydon's theorising on this vexed question did but little towards solving the practical problem as to his right course of action, and he was still in doubt when the clock of Holborn Town Hall told that the hour he had given himself had expired. He returned to the solicitor's office.

"Mr. Perry said I was to show you into his room, sir," said the clerk without giving him time to speak.

"Is the lady I left with Mr. Perry gone?"

"I don't know sir. All Mr. Perry told me was that he wished to see you directly you came. I'll tell him you're here."

Graydon followed the clerk who threw open the door marked "private" and announced him. Graydon entered, walked round the screen surrounding the door and found himself face to face with Alicia.

CHAPTER XXI

ALICIA'S DETERMINATION

THERE was momentary embarrassment on both sides. Graydon saw that Alicia by her start of astonishment was as little prepared to see him as he was to see her.

"I beg your pardon. I didn't know . . ." Graydon was beginning when Mr. Perry interposed.

"It's all right, Mr. Graydon. Come in. Don't scold me for not warning Miss Montrose that you might call."

To attempt any formality would have been but a farce. Graydon went up at once to Alicia.

"This is not of my seeking," said he in a low voice. "I hope you're not offended."

"No. Why should I be?"

They looked into each other's eyes. Solicitude, questioning, were written in his; anxiety, worry, distress in hers. The remembrance of her words "I love you, Eric" was at that moment vivid in his mind. His voice trembled slightly as he said:

"You're not looking well. Has anything happened?"

"Nothing. I've been a little out of sorts. It's of no importance. I hope to be better soon."

He wondered if she had been troubled by her husband, but, of course, such a question then was impossible.

During their interchange of words they had quite forgotten the lawyer. Perry reminded them of his presence by an apologetic cough. They at once turned to him.

"Sit down, Mr. Graydon," said he. "I have thought it was advisable to have your assistance at a little friendly council. I've not asked Miss Montrose's permission, but I do so now. May I tell Mr. Graydon of your resolve?"

"Yes, please do. I would rather he should know everything."

There was unmistakeable relief to the constrained position in Alicia's ready consent. Eric's face lighted up. That consent seemed somehow to say that their vow of separation was not firmly rooted in her heart.

"Let me tell you then, Mr. Graydon, that Miss Montrose's object in coming here is to declare positively that in the event of Mr. Haggar's will proving to be genuine and valid, she will not touch one penny of the money to which she will be entitled. I've endeavoured to persuade her to alter her determination, and I've told her she's far too sensitive, but my arguments have been unavailing, and it occurred to me that you, Mr. Graydon, would be more successful. Knowing that you were about to call, I took the liberty of detaining Miss Montrose on one excuse and the other, until you came. I hope I've the forgiveness of you both."

"You have mine with all my heart," cried Graydon, his glance resting on Alicia, to watch the effect of the solicitor's words.

"No doubt you did it for the best," said Alicia her eyes cast down. "It's quite true. Mr. Perry

has correctly stated what is in my mind with regard to what may happen, but I can hardly believe it. There's not the slightest reason why Mr. Haggar should have been so generous."

"I don't agree with you, Miss Montrose," said the lawyer. "In the face of Mr. Haggar's letter—always supposing that to be genuine also, and I really see no cause for thinking otherwise, for who could have written such a letter but he?—there's nothing outrageous in the fact that he should leave you his wealth. The conversations I have had with Mr. Haggar on the subject of his will are entirely confirmatory of this view."

"I know nothing about that," exclaimed Alicia agitatedly. "The letter is, I suppose, what I might have expected, but why did he write it? We had said all there was to be said about the matter. It was unnecessary, and now that it has been published for all the world to read, it has inflicted a cruel injustice on me which, at least, I might have been spared. I never—never gave Mr. Haggar the slightest encouragement. I never deceived him as to my feelings. You don't think that of me do you?" she cried, turning suddenly to Graydon.

"No. You are incapable of deception."

"Thank you for saying that. But, Mr. Perry, you haven't stated *all* my objections. It's terrible to think I should benefit by poor Mr. Haggar's death. I can't forget how he died. I never *shall* forget. No one knows the agony I've gone through but myself. I've sometimes thought . . ."

She stopped. The white lips quivered and that look of terror which Eric remembered so well, came into her eyes.

"It's impossible not to respect your motives and to sympathise with you, Miss Montrose," said the solicitor gently. "At the same time there is such a thing as being over scrupulous. What do you think Mr. Graydon?"

"Miss Montrose is quite right," said Eric steadily.

"That's your opinion is it? It will make no difference in regard to the law of the matter whatever you may both think. If the will should turn out to be all right the money will belong to Miss Montrose whether she likes it or not. You'll have to give us instructions what you intend to do. You can't repudiate what is yours by law without determining what's to be done with it. You may say 'I won't have it; I won't touch it.' Well, that doesn't alter the position. Dividends fall due in the usual way and we shall send them to you as we are bound to do—that is if we're appointed trustees. Now we're on the subject of the will I may say that there's an omission which strikes me as curious. No mention is made of an executor. As a rule Mr. Haggar was most methodical, but I suppose his mind was so disturbed he forgot this somewhat important point. Trustees, of course, will have to be appointed."

"Doesn't it strike you, Mr. Perry, that all this talk is rather premature," said Graydon. "You haven't got the documents yet you know. There's a lot to be done before Miss Montrose is called upon to give her decision."

"That's so, but you must understand that Miss Montrose called here for the express purpose of letting me know her intentions, and there was no alternative but to discuss the subject. I shall

enquire into the truth of this 'find' all the same. For the time being we can only await the progress of events."

"Then the friendly council is over?"

The solicitor looked at Alicia as though his decision rested with her.

She bowed.

"Yes. You know my resolve, Mr. Perry. I shall adhere to it."

"Very well. We shall have to proceed without you, that's all."

Eric glanced at Alicia. "Shall we go?" his eyes said plainly enough. She shook hands with Mr. Perry and Graydon opened the door. He followed her out.

Naturally they turned to the quietude of Grays Inn rather than to the turmoil of Holborn. They found themselves in South Square and the old world surroundings were pleasant and reposeful. Very few words had passed between them, yet both felt they had much to say. Eric regarded her silence as a good sign. Had she determined to adhere to the compact of farewell she would have lost no time in telling him so.

"Is it worth while keeping up this make-believe, Alicia?" at last said he with nervous desperation. "You no more want to say good-bye than I do."

"It isn't what we want that matters."

"I'm not so sure about that. If we were not continually in want of something what would be the use of living? It seems to me that we've never yet talked heart to heart. That's what *I* want, Alicia."

"I know—I know," she returned hurriedly. "And that's impossible."

"Why?"

"You understand as well as I do—the obstacles."

"Yes, and they don't frighten me. Shall we come to the bed-rock of the difficulty—this scoundrelly husband of yours. Has he any power over you that he terrifies you so?"

"He has only the power the law gives him to pursue, to annoy, to threaten me."

"You're wrong there. The law gives him no such power. Isn't there something else. But, perhaps, I ought not to put such a question."

"If you mean by that, anything that *I've* done, my answer is no."

"Dearest," he cried somewhat distressed. "Can you think I should make any suggestion? No—no. But you say he's threatened you? That's all the more reason why I should never leave you. Did you tell Perry that you were married?"

"No. I couldn't, and, indeed, there was no necessity."

"But a lawyer sees things from a different standpoint and he might help you."

"No. Mr. Perry can do nothing and—and while no one but you knows that I'm tied to this man I feel, in a way, safe, because I know you'll never breathe a word. But if my marriage were public property, and if afterwards—oh, it would kill me."

She was intensely agitated and Graydon forbore questioning her further, despite the fact that the mystery of her words puzzled and troubled him.

"There's some veil between us, Alicia, which you don't care to raise, and which I daren't ask you to

raise," said he presently. "But I'll risk what's behind. Don't think me curious if I ask whether you've formed any plans for the future?"

"Oh, I *had* plans some weeks ago—when I went to Uxbridge. I've written a few stories from time to time, and I wanted to write more. I had a novel in my mind, but—things unexpected came about, and I was not able to settle down. And now—well, I begin to despair. Plans are useless. I feel sometimes that it's hopeless to fight against fate."

"Fate in your case appears to mean that you regard yourself powerless, and that all you can do is to resign yourself to whatever may happen. That isn't my way of looking at things."

"Nor is it mine?" she retorted quickly. "Shall I give you a proof? I didn't tell Mr. Perry *one* reason among the many why nothing on earth can make me accept any of Mr. Haggar's money. If this man—I hate the word husband when I think of him—knew I was possessed of a fortune he would make my existence, miserable as it is now, a living torture. In some way he discovered before the will was found, that Mr. Haggar had made one. He hopes to frighten me into accepting the enormous fortune that Mr. Perry speaks of, so that he may lay his hands upon it. I would die rather than that he, of all men in the world, should benefit."

"And when he knows it's useless for him to hope for anything of the kind, perhaps he'll cease to persecute you," Graydon cried eagerly.

"I don't know. Out of spite and disappointment he may do anything."

Her face became very troubled. How could she tell what part jealousy might not play?

"Look here, Alicia," said Graydon with quiet determination, "there's only one way out of this terrible coil. The thought's been hovering in my mind ever since you told me of your unhappy marriage. I've fought against it but it's no use. You must throw in your lot with mine. We must never separate. I know nothing of you but what you've told me yet I trust you all in all."

"No, no," she cried agitatedly, "I can't wreck your life. I won't."

The words were emphatic enough, but the old decision and determination were wanting. The difference did not go unnoticed by Graydon.

"But it will be wrecked just the same if you say no—you forget that."

His dogged earnestness was hard to resist. She glanced at him almost shyly. There was quite a girlish blush on her cheek. He saw and was emboldened.

"We've only our two selves, Alicia, to consider. What's the world to us? If you're thinking of what I once called my political prospects they're done with. My father and I perfectly understand each other. We've agreed to differ. I'm free to do as I like. Shall I let you into a secret? My father's no longer prejudiced against you. He was quite angry when I told him that we had said good-bye. But," added Eric drily, "that was after the will was found. My dear old narrow minded father's a man of business, pure and simple, with a decided bias for the conventional proprieties, and for what he calls respectability. Money of course atones for everything and he considered I was missing a chance of marrying a rich woman when he heard that we'd separated."

"There's no question of marriage. You know that," said Alicia, her resolute tone returning. "But haven't we talked long enough? Is it worth while going on? Isn't everything coming back to what we left off with the last time we saw each other—good-bye?"

"No it is not. But when you say we've talked long enough I agree. It's now time for action. I'm not going to say good-bye. Nor are you. When I consented you took me by surprise. To-day I know more about you and about that person—and may be if I knew all it would make me still more fixed in my resolve not to let you go. Will you wait a week?"

"A week? Why? For what purpose?"

Graydon was thinking of the question of finances. Within a week his cheque would come and he could also raise a little money by selling his polo ponies and his furniture and curios.

He had no definite scheme at that moment to suggest to Alicia but vague ideas were floating in his mind. One of these ideas was to leave London with her and go to some old world, sleepy, continental town where she could write to her heart's content. As for himself when he had made it certain she was having the rest and repose of mind she needed so much, he would come back to London and get a post of some kind while he was reading for the bar. Or he might also try his hand at his pen. There was no readier way of earning money provided one had ability.

"Well you don't say what's to happen at the end of a week," said Alicia breaking in upon his reverie.

He told her, not without hesitation, of his castle in the air. He was afraid she might say something to damp his ardour, but she listened quietly, and he painted a glowing picture of the happiness of peace and retirement which would be hers if she would only consent to be guided by him.

"Why can't we be friends—companions—chums?" he argued. "Is the thing impossible?"

"Not impossible I suppose, but——"

"Then I won't hear of any objection," he broke out impetuously. "Let us have some lunch and talk it over."

She reluctantly consented, but on the main question he could get nothing definite from her. He was careful to avoid anything like sentiment, and while they were in a quiet corner of the grill room at the Holborn Restaurant they might have been merely acquaintances so far as any stranger could tell. But though she would give him no decided answer she made a step towards confidence by telling him where she was staying.

"Poynter's Hotel? I know it. Rather stuffy isn't it? Why don't you go for a week to the place where you *didn't* go—Brighton?"

"I'd rather stay where I am," said she lowering her voice. "Didn't I tell you that I'm being watched? If I move it will excite suspicion. You don't know the enemy you're fighting against."

So she admitted he was fighting—and on her behalf! That was something, and though she had not said a word in approval of his scheme he knew the victory was won.

During the lunch—to Graydon the most delightful he had ever sat down to—Alicia spoke of her school

days—of her wild marriage—of her speedy repentance; and the confession relieved her mind. But she did not tell all—she could not.

Meanwhile somebody else was enjoying herself—Jenny Bassett. The little spy had followed Alicia to the lawyer's office; she had seen Graydon leave—her sharp eyes recognised him at once as the delicate looking young man whom she saw go to Vine Cottage—she watched him come back at the end of the hour; and she waited until the two came out and wandered up and down South Square. Then she followed them to the Holborn Restaurant, and guessing that they were not likely to leave for some little time she posted off to Douglas's lodgings.

"This ought to be worth five guineas to me. I was wondering when the love was coming in."

And her eyes sparkled with glee.

CHAPTER XXII

JIM ROOKSON'S "BURST"

DOUGLAS had not long been out of bed when he heard his own particular bell—two tugs at the top brass knob on the felt hand door post. The clang sent his nerves quivering. If it should be the police? He crept downstairs to the window on the landing below and looked out. He recognised Jenny and he felt somewhat relieved, but not altogether so. Had anything gone wrong that she should look him up now instead of waiting until the usual time in the evening?

"Got some news for you, chappie," whispered Jenny as soon as he had opened the door.

"Good or bad?"

"How can I tell? I'm not in the know. You're so precious close. It's just this—I foxed Miss Montrose to the office of the lawyer chap you told me about in Gray's Inn, and——"

"Half a moment, Jenny, while I get my hat. We can't talk here."

Douglas started upstairs, his nervousness gone. The announcement of finding the will had, of course, sent Alicia to Perry and Latimer to make enquiries. There was nothing alarming in this. He returned to Jenny and took her to a quiet tavern telling her not to go on with her story until they were sitting down comfortably.

"Now then, go ahead," said he when Miss Bassett had refreshed herself with the bottled stout, which she could always drink at any hour of the day.

Jenny obeyed and Douglas's dark face became darker as he listened. He said nothing, but his irritability and uneasiness were manifest in the biting of his lips and the restless tapping of his finger tips on the marble-topped table.

Meanwhile Jenny Bassett prattled to her heart's content.

"You may bet your bottom dollar he's sweet on her and she's sweet on him. *I* know, bless you. Isn't that rather up against the man who's going to pay you when he marries the girl all the money's been left to? If the marriage ain't wangled properly where's my coin you talked so big about to come from? It didn't occur to me when I was shadowing them that the Johnnie she was spooning with might queer our pitch, but I've been turning the thing over in my mind since and it came upon me all in a flash."

"Don't you worry about that, Jenny. I'm not going to be baulked by anybody—least of all by that swanker."

Douglas did not seem to be talking to Jenny when he said this. He appeared rather to be addressing some imaginary person. His expression was evil and menacing, and Jenny involuntarily shrank from him. Then he pulled himself together. It was all important that Jenny's confidence in him should not be weakened in the slightest. He had, of course, seen Perry's advertisements, enquiring for Jenny and Rookson, and the next step in his scheme was close at hand. He *might* do without

Rookson, but Jenny—no. She was his sheet anchor.

"Look here, kiddie," said he with a hard laugh, "you're safe whoever Miss Montrose marries. When all is settled and money's dropping through their fingers like water, what's to prevent you from going to the lady and letting out that the will's bogus? Don't you think she'll part with whatever you choose to ask rather than lose her fortune?"

"Not me. I don't like that sort of thing. I can't bluff well enough. I can see myself locked up for blackmailing."

"In that case, to save yourself you've only got to give me away."

"What? Do you think I'd do anything so beastly mean? I'm not a saint and I've never pretended to be one, but I won't be a sneak. It's unkind of you, chappie, to say I'd do such a thing."

A sudden wave of emotion passed over the girl. Her face flushed, her bosom heaved, the corners of her mouth twitched, and she dabbed her eyes with a little ball of pocket handkerchief.

"You silly kiddie," laughed Douglas, "do you think I meant it? I was only chaffing."

"Then I don't like such chaff."

"My word! I believe you're getting fond of me."

"And what if I am?"

"Nothing. I'm fond of you too. Drink up your stout and have another. We'll have something to eat and mooch about the west for an hour or two and then go to the Oxford or the Tivoli, or the Pavilion—anywhere you like."

He put his arm around her waist and Jenny

allowed herself to be soothed. She had her moments of sentiment and of late Douglas had been mixed up with them. They sat chatting for some time and Douglas talked her back into her usual good humour. Then he approached the matter uppermost in his mind. He had borrowed a newspaper from the barmaid for the purpose.

"How about going to the lawyer chap to-morrow, little Jenny?" said he playfully, pinching her ear. "Read that." He pointed out the advertisement. She gazed at it, and her face became serious.

"Jim Rookson won't be there will he?"

"I'll see to that. Mind, you must remember everything the lawyer says to you, and what you say to him, and I'll meet you directly you come out. Then I shall be able to prepare Rookson with the same story. See?"

Jenny had her nose buried in the *Tizer*. Douglas was puffing meditatively at a cigar, his eyes fixed on a mirror which reflected the door. While awaiting Jenny's answer he saw in the glass the door slowly open, a head thrust inside the saloon and then withdrawn. Douglas caught but the merest glance of the man's face, but it was enough. He was pretty certain that it was Rookson, and he was full of apprehension

"Jenny," said he abruptly, "we'll get."

They went out by another door and made their way to King's Cross, dined, then a taxi took them to the West, and they loafed away the time by playing dominoes in a café restaurant, until the music halls opened. They talked by fits and starts and drank heavily, at least, Douglas did, and every now and then he had long periods of silence which Jenny

did not seek to disturb. Not only was she used to his moods, but she also was disposed towards quietude. She was thinking of the ordeal she was to go through on the following day, and the more she thought of it the more she dreaded it.

On leaving the café they went to the Pavilion. Neither of them took much interest in the performance, not that it was indifferent, but their minds were fixed on other things. Midway through the programme Douglas got up.

"The show won't be over before half-past eleven," said he. "I'll come back in two hours time. Wait for me. Hope you won't be dull."

"I suppose I can amuse myself if I want to. I ought to be able to by this time," said Jenny pettishly.

Douglas took no notice of the provocation in her eyes.

"I'm going to look up Jim Rookson."

The provocative eyes suddenly became uneasy.

"Don't say a word to him that you've been with me," she whispered.

"Not likely. Make your mind easy about Jim. I know how to settle him."

Without another word Douglas struggled along the crowded stalls. He drew a breath of relief when he was in the fresh air. His thoughts and the close atmosphere of the hall had been suffocating. He crossed to the Piccadilly and Brompton Tube Station, and booked to King's Cross. From here Burton Crescent was but ten minutes' walk and letting himself in at the dingy house he went along the dismally lighted passage to the head of the kitchen stairs.

"Anybody been for me?" he called down the staircase.

"Yes, Mr. Douglas," returned the "general." A man came about two o'clock this afternoon, and wanted to see you most particular. I said you'd just gone out, but that I thought he might find you at the 'Crown and Sceptre.'"

"You bally idiot," muttered Douglas, and wheeling round he went out of the house.

"So *that* was how Jim came to put his head into the saloon bar," he growled.

The information was disquieting, for if Rookson were looking for him why did he not speak? Then a possible reason occurred to him.

"Of course he saw that I was with someone and perhaps didn't know it was Jenny. She had her face down I remember."

He was now walking very slowly in the direction of King's Cross. He entered the grimy, frowsy, labyrinth of mean streets, in one of which Rookson lodged. He reached the house, but could not make up his mind what to do, and he paced up and down in front for a quarter-of-an-hour. Then quickly, as though he must act before he had time to alter his mind, he rang Rookson's bell.

Jim did exactly the thing that Douglas himself had done earlier in the day—looked out of the landing window. The light of a gas lamp glanced on the crown of Douglas's glossy hat. No detective would affect such splendour, and with a strange savage look in his eyes, Rookson shuffled downstairs and opened the door.

"I want to have a talk with you, Jim. Come out."

"Is it safe?" said Jim with a quiet sneer.

"I shouldn't have asked you if it wasn't. You'll have to present yourself in a day or two at the lawyer's office, so you may as well get used to the streets."

Rookson had his hat on and without a word he joined his visitor, and the two strolled towards King's Cross. Douglas expected Jim would have said something about his calling at Burton Crescent, but the man was dumb. He strode along, his hands in his pockets, and his lips pursed up as though whistling. No whistle, however, came from them, unless a kind of hissing sound could have been called a whistle.

"You've seen the advertisement in to-day's paper?" said Douglas at last, breaking a silence which had become unendurable.

"Yes."

"That's all right. I thought before you went to see the solicitor that we'd better go over the story once more. Shall we have a drink?"

"No. I don't want any drink," jerked out Rookson, "you said you wanted to have a talk with me and that's what *I* want too."

"What's the matter with you, Jim? Why are you so ratty?"

"Ratty is it? Well, and why shouldn't I be ratty if I like?"

"By all means; only that isn't the state of mind that'll help our talk."

"That's where you're wrong, my lad—that's where you're wrong."

There was no oiliness, no deference, no comradeship in Rookson's tone. Douglas took no notice,

but to judge by the hardening lines at the corners of his mouth he was not insensible to his companion's offensive manner.

They had passed King's Cross and were walking along the Caledonian road, when Rookson suddenly stopping, pointed to a blank, black space on the right hand side, a quarter of a mile or so up the road. It was a yard attached to a wharf abutting on the bank of the Regent's Canal.

"Let's go *there*. I've something to say to you that aint like a will—it won't want any witnesses."

Rookson's voice was little more than a low growl and Douglas knew very well that he would have to be on the alert. For anything he could tell, Jim might be on the verge of one of his dangerous "bursts."

Douglas assented without the slightest hesitation It would not do to thwart Rookson in his present mood. Besides he had his own game to play. Sinister thoughts which had been in his mind for some time past in regard to his associate, now that the latter was no longer of any use, were concentrating themselves into action. Jim's suggestion seemed to promise an opportunity for which he had been waiting. That opportunity was not unconnected with the line of inky water beyond.

The two walked silently into the darkness. A tall gaunt building—a factory or warehouse—was to the right; sheds were to the left. In front was the canal, an oily, slowly moving stream. Some fifty yards to the right the canal disappeared into that strange uncanny tunnel of the existence of which so few people in London know. For half a mile the canal runs underground and emerges

just past Colebrook Row, Islington. There is no towing path 'neath this Hades-like tunnel, and the canal boats are propelled by the bargees lying on their backs on the roofs of the little cabins, and pressing their feet against the arched brickwork above.

Douglas was careful to keep his eyes fixed on his companion. Rookson on the other hand was staring straight in front of him. Suddenly he turned and faced Douglas.

"Now then," he began viciously, "what about Jenny Bassett? You're precious thick with her. What's it mean?"

"You fool. It means nothing. I'm employing Jenny just as I'm employing you."

"Oh, are you? Something more than employment I'll swear. Don't tell me any lies. D've think I don't know you, 'Bert Douglas? You're playing me a dirty trick over Jenny. You know well enough she's *my* girl. You're trying to rob me of her, you skunk. I needn't say any more. You know what you are, and what's more you know that *I* know too."

"You're talking rot. Jenny's nothing to me."

"What! Didn't I see you and her hobnobbing together this afternoon in the 'Crown and Sceptre'? I didn't expect to find her with you when the slavey told me I might see you at the pub, but I wasn't surprised. I've been shadowing you two for a week and more. I've seen you kiss her at parting. I've seen

"Shut up, don't be an ass. Where's the harm? A girl doesn't mind a kiss."

"What about the man she belongs to? Doesn't

he mind? I'll have no more of your fooling. I've got you in the hollow of my hand and you know it. Ah! twice over. There's the will and—there's the 15th of July. Supposing when I go to the lawyer I let out about the first? Suppose I go to Scotland Yard and let out about the second?"

"That'll do," breathed Douglas hoarsely. "What do you want? Let's have it out fair and square."

"That!"

"And *that*!"

Rookson's arm had gone up and a life preserver he had until now concealed up his sleeve came down. Douglas ducked and the weapon missing his head hit his shoulder a smashing blow at the very moment his clenched hand had shot out at Rookson's face. The hand reached its mark but there was no force in the delivery. Before Rookson could use the life preserver a second time Douglas had closed with him and was trying to possess himself of the weapon.

Not a word escaped their lips. Death was in the thoughts of both. The light of insanity shone in Rookson's eyes, grim tenacity of purpose in those of Douglas. Madness had stiffened Jim's flabby muscles, otherwise he could hardly have resisted his wiry, muscular antagonist. Moreover, the blow of the life preserver had deprived Douglas's right arm of half its normal strength. Unable to wrest the life preserver from Rookson's grasp he edged him back inch by inch towards the canal. The two silent, writhing men gradually neared the line of black water, Rookson clinging to his opponent like a wild cat

Douglas had ceased to trouble himself about the

life preserver. He had another plan in his mind of "doing down" his enemy. When he had succeeded in pushing him sufficiently near he meant to leap with him into the canal. He knew that Rookson could not swim, whereas he, himself, was quite at home in the water.

Close by a barge was moored, the towing rope, tied to the rudder post, stretching some four yards along the ground to a hook in the stonework of the bank. Just as Douglas was nerving himself for the final effort he was suddenly precipitated into the canal carrying Rookson with him. Accident had hastened the execution of his design—accident had frustrated it. He had caught his foot in the taut rope but this would not have mattered had he not on plunging into the water struck his head against the rudder. Vague confused movements of a dark shapeless mass, violent splashings, smothered gurgling sounds, ghastly in their significance, followed, and then all was still and the only evidence of that terrible death struggle that remained was in the slowly widening circles on the black oily surface.

* * * * * * *

Standing near the entrance to the Pavilion, just out of the line of the jostling crowd, Jenny was looking to the right and left for Douglas. It was now nearly a quarter to twelve and the public-houses, the cafés, the supper restaurants, were packing all the life and business they could into the short time left them by the law. Under other circumstances Jenny would have taken her share of the feverish, short-lived gaiety. But not to-night. She was not in the mood

Douglas had left her depressed and his non-appearance had turned depression into anxiety. But he would surely come, she told herself, and, for fear of missing him, she would have continued to wait where she was but for the police. So she wandered to and fro between Piccadilly and Leicester Square impervious to smirks and offers of refreshment.

Big Ben tolled the knell of parting drinks; her last chance of an "enlivener" was gone and she wished she had not snubbed the men who would have treated her. She lingered doubtfully at the end of the Charing Cross Road, and finally decided in favour of the motor bus and the dinginess of Camden Town. Then came a disturbed night and the morning's heavy sleep.

"There's your tea, Jenny. Now don't let it get cold after me a getting up an hour earlier a purpose to make it for you 'cause you said you wanted to be out o' the 'ouse by ten o'clock. T'aint many daaters as have mothers as wait on 'em 'and an' foot."

"And t'aint many mothers as live on the fat of the land with what their daughters work for."

"Well and aint it their dooty? Not that *I* see much o' the fat."

Jenny cut the discussion short by asking if there was a letter for her.

"Not a line for nobody," and the slatternly, unwieldy figure, with a dirty shawl flung over her iron grey unkempt hair, shuffled out of the room.

"He might ha' dropped me a note," muttered Jenny wrinkling her brows.

Then she yawned several times, sipped her tea,

and struggled out of bed. Everything seemed to go wrong that morning. She wanted to dress herself as though she were going after a situation in her old line, and she had a difficulty in finding suitable clothes. Her nerves were all anyhow, and she was in two minds whether she would go to the solicitor. But she had promised Douglas, and the man's word with her was law. She missed Douglas more than ever, she yearned sadly for a word from him to give her courage. But she would not go from her arrangement with him, and at last she was ready and she departed on her journey to Warwick Court.

CHAPTER XXIII

ALICIA'S DREAD SECRET

MR. PERRY had been unusually busy early that morning. He had had a visit from Detective Inspector Shagford, who had told him, among other interesting things, that he had discovered James Salmon, the ex-convict, who had been passing under the name of James Rookson since coming from Dartmoor. The coincidence of the name in the advertisement could not be overlooked, and the solicitor had promised to 'phone to Scotland Yard should "James Rookson" present himself. After the detective had gone Mr. Perry sat down to study quietly the originals of David Haggar's will, and the letter which had been forwarded to him the night before.

Half-an-hour's close scrutiny sent him to the telephone, but not to talk to Shagford. He rang up Dolamore, the famous handwriting expert. In answer Dolamore promised to call before lunch, and Perry walked back to his writing-table and was about to resume his examination of the documents, when one of his clerks entered the room.

"A young woman to see you, sir. She says her name's Jane Bassett."

Mr. Perry's impassive face lightened.

"I'll see her at once, Benson—and bring your note book."

Jenny was shown in. She had no need to assume her manner. Her nervousness and timidity were real. She was wishing that she had not come.

A glance round the room relieved her of some of her fears. She dreaded lest Rookson should be there.

She sat herself on the extreme edge of the chair and fixed her eyes on the lawyer's hard face. Her life had made her a pretty good judge of character and she tried to gather what kind of man she had to tackle. Her estimate of Mr. Perry did not give her much satisfaction. That grey-whiskered, ferret-eyed man was not worth wasting the powder and shot of cajolery upon. Up to the present moment she had looked upon Douglas's scheme as something unreal—almost in the nature of a jest. But it seemed serious now, with those penetrating eyes resting upon her.

"Your name's Jenny Bassett?" said Mr. Perry, breaking a long silence.

"Yes, sir."

"What do you want to see me about?"

"I don't know. I saw an advertisement asking me to call here and so I've come."

"Did you write that name?"

He put Haggar's supposed will into her hand, concealing, however, the body of the document.

"Yes, sir. That's my writing."

The solicitor went on to put a number of questions in his short, sharp, authoritative manner, peering at Jenny from beneath his shaggy brows in a way which was very disquieting. She began by being glib and confident, but before long she saw she would have to take time, and think what she ought to say. Once outside the story which Douglas had drilled into her it was as much as she could do to prevent herself floundering. Perry asked her about so many things she did not expect. What hour of the

day was it when she was called by Mr. Haggar into his room? Was it by chance she answered his summons or did he ring for her expressly? Was she or Rookson called first? Did she have any conversation with Rookson after the signing? These were only a few of the questions for which Douglas had not prepared her.

It was very embarrassing also to know that every word she uttered was being taken down by a shorthand clerk, and to be told that she would have to swear an affidavit that what she had said was the truth. Jenny was not quite sure what an affidavit was, but it sounded dreadful, and did not tend to allay her nervousness.

Then the lawyer proceeded to go into matters which seemed to Jenny to have nothing to do with her signature. She regarded it as both impertinent and inquisitive to be asked when she left the Empress Hotel; how long was it before she obtained another situation; when she left Eaton Square and why; and what was she doing at the present moment? Mr. Perry was even curious about her mother. At last she lost patience and burst out:

"I didn't come here to talk about myself. What I do and what mother does is no affair of anybody's, and I shan't answer no more silly questions of that sort. I've done what the advertisement asked me and I wish you good morning."

"Stop a moment, Miss Bassett. Just one or two more questions and, perhaps, I shan't want to trouble you any further."

During Jenny's outburst the solicitor had his eyes fixed on a slip of paper. On it were some memoranda. The slip had been given him by Shagford.

"When did James Rookson leave the Empress Hotel?" said Mr. Perry, looking up from the slip.

This was a facer. Rookson, she knew well enough, had been discharged in June. But she dared not tell the solicitor this, so she fell back upon the convenient formula that she could not remember.

"I've information that he wasn't at the hotel at all in July, and certainly not on the day when you signed the paper."

"I don't know anything about that, sir. I only know that's my writing. I don't see as anything else concerns me."

"I'm not so sure, Miss Bassett. However, at the moment I won't ask you any more questions, but you can't go yet. Just step into yonder room and wait. I won't detain you long."

"But I must go—I really must. I've got to see a lady about a place at half-past eleven and it's now five and twenty past."

"Don't worry about that. Any loss you may sustain will be fully covered if your story's correct."

Jenny had no alternative but to do what the lawyer told her. There was something about his manner which cowed her. Yet what had she to fear? She had done nothing against the law?

She crossed the room and the clerk was about to open the door for her when the bell of the telephone rang. After the usual enquiry and reply came a message in the midst of which Mr. Perry signalled with his disengaged hand to Jenny not to go. She stayed and the solicitor went on with his conversation through the 'phone. He suddenly looked up from the machine and put a question which rather took Jenny aback.

"Miss Bassett—were you friendly with James Rookson?"

"Oh, pretty middling."

"You weren't sweethearts, eh?"

"No, indeed. Not likely."

"Then if you heard that anything had happened to him you wouldn't take it very deeply to heart."

"I—I don't think so. I should be sorry of course. What's the matter?"

Jenny went a little white. There was a gravity in the lawyer's manner which alarmed her. Half-a-dozen thoughts were jumbled in her brain. She trembled slightly

"A man whom the police knew as James Salmon, but who is believed to be James Rookson, has been found dead in the Regent's Canal near Caledonian Road. It looks as if you were the best person to settle the point. No doubt some of the servants at the Empress Hotel could identify him, but I've told the police you're here and it'll save time if you go with the officer. He'll be round very shortly."

"Please don't ask me," faltered Jenny. "I hate looking at dead people. I'd rather not."

"Oh, but you must," said Mr. Perry peremptorily. "This is a very mysterious affair and you may be able to help the police. Another man has also been found in the canal. At present he's unknown and that adds to the mystery. I'm sorry an unpleasant a task has been put upon you, but we all have disagreeable and painful things to do at some period of our lives."

Jenny seemed hardly to hear what Mr. Perry was saying. She was staring stonily into space and the solicitor noticing she was much disturbed,

told her in a gentler tone than he had hitherto used to sit down and rest quietly. She obeyed and remained silent and dazed until Shagford walked in.

"This is Miss Bassett about whom I spoke to you through the telephone," said Mr. Perry.

"Miss Bassett and I have met before I fancy," said the inspector affably.

Jenny remembered him. It was two years ago. Shagford was then a sergeant and Jenny was in service. She was suspected of having taken some trinket belonging to her mistress, and the sergeant was called in while her box was searched but nothing was found.

Jenny was indifferent to the detective's recognition. A careless shrug of the shoulders was all the acknowledgement she showed. Shagford talked in whispers with Mr. Perry for a few minutes, then he turned to Jenny and announced that he was ready. The girl heard him with the dazed air which had never left her; the two departed and Mr. Perry went back to the documents and was examining them through a magnifying glass when the expert arrived.

"I've formed my own opinion, but I should like to hear yours before I say anything," said he.

Dolamore went over the will and the letter. He knew nothing of the circumstances and he formed his judgment on the writing alone. The solicitor, with his elbows on the arms of his revolving chair, and his chin resting on the tips of his fingers awaited his decision.

"The letter is written by one hand and the postscript and the will by another," said the expert at last. The paper has been in water and the skele-

tons, so to speak, of the characters are laid bare. The difference in the two David Haggars is particularly noticeable. The form of the letters are much the same, with variations here and there, but the decision of the signature to the letter is wanting to that of the will. The writing of the latter and that of the postscript is laborious, but before the ink ran by being exposed to damp, the effort to imitate was by no means so patent. My opinion is that the postscript and will are forgeries."

"That's my opinion, too," was the answer of the solicitor. "Result—a windfall for the Crown."

Douglas had made the mistake often committed by ingenious rogues—he had been *too* clever. His dodge of damping the paper to give it a natural appearance and to deceive the expert had had the opposite effect. As for the omission of the mention of an executor which had at first excited Mr. Perry's suspicions, Douglas had not forgotten it, but he thought it safer to leave it out.

While the scheme so carefully arranged was being wrecked in the solicitor's office, Jenny was in the grim chamber of death. She was as white as a ghost and was quivering from head to foot.

Said Shagford in a low voice:

"You haven't any doubt, my girl, that you knew this man at the Empress Hotel as James Rookson?"

"That's Jim right enough," faltered the shuddering Jenny.

The mortuary-keeper replaced the sheet and went round to the other side of the stone slab. Here was lying a second veiled figure.

"Do you want her to see the other man?" he asked the detective.

"No—no—no! I won't look," burst out Jenny.

Her protest came too late. Shagford had nodded to the keeper and the white cloth was drawn back. One hysterical scream came from poor Jenny's lips. She would have fainted but for the firm grasp of Shagford's hand. Her one romance—the one sincere passion of her sordid life—was over.

Before the day was out the story of the tragic discovery was the talk of London. Douglas had been identified, but not by Jenny. Not a word did she utter concerning Douglas, and it was the prison records—photographs, marks, measurements—which helped the police to determine who he was. But beyond this they were helpless. They might have been faced by a brick wall so far as the solution of the mystery of the Regent's Canal was concerned.

Jenny was staunch to the truth that was in her—loyalty to her comrades; and later on she stuck unflinchingly to her story how she came to sign her name on David Haggar's alleged will. It was vain to urge that she was telling falsehoods, and that Rookson could not possibly have been at the Empress Hotel on the fatal 15th of July. Her lips were sealed, and she allowed the solicitor to think what he pleased.

Before many days were over Mr. Perry wrote to Alicia, pointing out that whatever might be the explanation, the will was undoubtedly a forgery, and congratulating her upon her determination to repudiate any claim which might be set up under so questionable a document.

"I must confess," wrote the lawyer in conclusion, "that the thing is a complete puzzle to me. Whether it is in your power to solve that puzzle I.

of course, cannot sa I thought once I was in the confidence of the late Mr. Haggar, but it is very clear that I was mistaken."

This letter reached Alicia at Poynter's Hotel just after Eric had called. The two had met several times since the death of Douglas, indeed, Graydon had hastened to her immediately he had satisfied himself that it was really Douglas who had been found in the canal, but in some odd way Alicia's freedom brought about a restraint in her manner which bewildered and worried him. He could not say she was cold, but she seemed disposed to be friendly rather than loving. She never gave him an opportunity to get back on the old footing. Of course, the plan of going to the continent was abandoned, but no fresh suggestion was made by either.

When Mr. Perry's letter arrived she glanced at its contents and handed it to Graydon.

"Can you read the riddle of *that*?" said she quietly.

"If a lawyer can't how is it to be expected *I* can?"

"You know more of my history than Mr. Perry does. That ride in that taxi with—with my husband for instance. I've never told you what passed between us then. I'm going to tell you now."

Graydon listened with breathless interest, while she made it clear that Douglas was the author of the forged will.

"But," said he when she had finished, "supposing the will had been genuine he could not have touched any money left to you solely."

"Do you suppose he wouldn't have found a way

to compel me to give him anything he wanted? Frederick Verlan—that was his real name—was steeped in wickedness. As sure as I am I'm talking to you so sure am I that it was he who attacked you at Uxbridge. I know what would have happened if I had refused him money—he would have revenged himself on me through you, Eric. Didn't I tell you over and over again that you were in danger? Wasn't it that which made me so anxious that we should part?"

Eric Graydon was silent. He was beginning to understand Alicia.

"Ah, you didn't know Verlan, you don't know him now. Only one person in the world could guage the depth of his crimes and that person was his unhappy wife. Come nearer to me Eric. I have to tell you something, but it must be whispered. Hold my hand—tight. I want to feel you near me."

He obeyed, and she went on in low tremulous accents:

"The photograph that was found on that dreadful night was taken by Verlan, who was clever in all kinds of trick photography. He pretended to be crazy over my eyes——"

"I should doubt whether it was a pretence," put in Eric. "Why should he not have been sincere?"

"He may have been. It doesn't matter. He made the photograph about two months before we were secretly married. Do you recollect that on the back was written "To F. V.?" The writing was mine. I thought I recognised my husband in the man who was sitting in the compart-

ment next to Mr. Haggar's and I was terrified. It might have averted the tragedy had I entered the carriage, but I couldn't. When the photograph was picked up and shewn to me I knew who was the assassin."

"Alicia!"

"Oh, it's true. I suppose I ought to have told everything, but it was too horrible. Of course it was a falsehood when I said the photograph had been in the possession of Mr. Haggar but what was I to do?"

"There was every possible excuse for you dearest."

"Perhaps. I only know that from that time to this my life has been one long period of dread and self torture. The hideous secret I was compelled to keep was slowly killing me. But—but it is my secret no longer. Forgive me, Eric, won't you?"

"Forgive you? My poor darling, what have I to forgive? I've only one thing to reproach you for. Why didn't you give me your entire confidence?"

"It was impossible. It would have been your duty to have spoken, and there could have been but one end. Think what it would have been to have had the blood of that man, evil as he was, on my soul!"

Her imploring eyes were fixed on him, but the old look of fear was absent. The ghastly secret which had been the barrier between them was a secret no longer, but another had taken its place—trust and faith in each other, the secret of perfect love.

THE END

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